

whiplash



TRACEY FARREN

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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whiplash

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This book of a work of fiction and all people, places and institutions are a product of the author's imagination. The setting of the story is loosely based on Muizenburg before its "upgrade." All references to local services and businesses and their personnel (such as police stations, pharmacies and clinics) are creative constructions.

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For my mother, Sheena

I'm gonna tell you all about it, Mom. I'm gonna tell it like I'm on the end of your bed, talking to you.

I'm not gonna cover up, cause there's no need. You'll see how it's all a flippin miracle. The whole weird year.

It's only one year in my life, Ma, but it's all the stuff you slept through when I was a kid. All the stuff you fished through when you got up.

I'm warning you, Ma, this is the truth.

miracle number one

New Year's day, a gull whacks into my window.

They say birds bring messages from the dead. I dunno who sent it but I'm ironing my socks when it smacks into the glass. I nearly wet my pants, I get such a fright. Shame, poor bird lies on its side, feathers floating. I hope like hell it's dead.

The South Easter blew it in. It hammers our building, chews on the paint. Spins off the South Pole and stays for days. It's turned the sea on its head, now it's blowing in birds.

The gull gets up, tries to walk a straight line. Bang! Into the glass. I clench my fanny. I can't help it, it's an old habit. You told me Mom, keep your fanny closed, else the birds can fly in. You said it to stop me peeing in my pants.

I'm still scared of thrashing wings and sudden thuds. Birds, and flying insects, if they come too close. The gull shuffles to the corner of the balcony and watches itself in the glass, its eyes that pale blue, like paraffin.

I creep round inside the flat. Knock back five Syndol, eat a lump of cheese. Down some cold Coke. I check out the bird, scared he's gonna try again. He sits between the broken wheels of my swivel chair. The sun cranks up above the bottle store, lights

the glass. He turns his back and waits, like he's waiting for an ambulance.

I put water in the mayonnaise lid. Find a piece of pie in the bin, cut it up tiny. I creep out on my knees. Slide the stuff towards the gull. Chuck myself back in the flat.

Annie's pissed off I didn't wanna party with her on New Year.

'So what did you do, ou meid?'

'Ag, just chilled. Read the TV Times.'

'What, up your stairs?'

'Mmmm. Tassies and me.'

Tassies is the cheapest red wine you can buy. But I'm not hung over. I just had a couple of glasses to wash down my Syns. I don't like to overdo things.

I gave my TV away but I still get the mag in the post. Annie can't read so I bring her news of the stars.

'Julia's pissed off with Danny. She bust him in his co-star's caravan. But Danny got into Julia while he was still married to *his* ex, so what does she expect?'

Annie shakes her head, pissed off for Julia.

'Poes.'

A Porsche slows down, a banged up yellow Carrera. A man with black eyes and slicked back hair nearly strips the thread on his neck. Annie shoots in the air, twangs the tar like it's a trampoline. She waves, sends three Egyptian geese shouting up from a roof. The Porsche slows down, staggers a bit along the M5.

'He looked famous! What do you think? He was famous, man!'

She does tricks for his mirror, tryna pull him back.

'Where from?'

Annie shrugs, tryna think.

The geese, fat as butter, swear as they land on the wall of the housing estate.

'Shit. New Year's for the birds.'

We're trawling again.

I slide my hand up our lamp post. Annie points a toe, swivels her hip in its socket, like she's loosening up to dance.

Down the road, Natasha comes out the bush. Sluips to her yield sign, all limp. White smoke from the bushes, must be her tripping pimp.

'What'd *you* do?'

'Smoked a hubbly bubbly with Alice.'

'Who ...?'

'My dad's new girlfriend.'

'What's she like?'

She shrugs. 'Twenty.'

Annie's dad's a Rasta dope dealer. Only dope though, not tik or mandrax. Annie's beautiful. She's got blow up lips and when she looks down, her lashes are like butterfly wings on her cheeks. Her skin's smooth as wind on the dunes. She's got a cute body, too. Curvy calves, high boobs. She's short, and she's got rubber joints. Now she hop, hop, hops on the tar, hooking men's eyes as they swipe past in their cars.

I stick my foot up against the vibracrete. There's no need to show the whole number. A short skirt and shadow hit just as hard. 'There's a bird at my flat with bad whiplash. Geez, I hope it buggers off, cause if I touch it, that's the end.'

'Huh?'

'If they smell human hands, the other birds attack it.'

Annie's not interested. 'You got a Triple X?'

I give her a peppermint, go close. 'Your eyes look a bit yellow from the dope.'

She disses me with a thick cluck of her tongue. '*Your* eyes look like you need a good klap.'

As I duck, Johan, the skraal policeman from Pretoria, pulls up in his off duty Corolla. We try look away, stare down the M5. There's no way I'm gonna waste myself on a freebee.

'He wants you, Annie.'

'Uh-uh. *You*, Tess.'

But Annie usually gets him, cause I'm Hanif's favourite.
The Pretoria policeman came here green, but he got wise quickly on the flats. When he started at Muizenberg, Hanif showed him round. First time they picked us up, I heard Pretoria ask, 'Is this the free punda?'

I tuned him from the back of the van. 'Fillet steak please, when you talk about me.'

'What?' Annie climbed in with me.

'Punda means meat in Zulu.'

I remember from home, those boys on 500 XT's. Popping wheelies, screaming, 'Punda!' Fresh broken voices, strap on an engine and be a man.

Funny enough, Pretoria doesn't scream, 'Punda!' when he comes. His voice unbreaks, goes high. Squeaks, 'Wee-wee-wee-wee,' all the way home. Pity not back to Pretoria.

A boy in a dark blue Beetle slows down. I run like mad to catch him, damn glad of my takkies. Annie's in funny, chunky clogs. She gets to clomp over to Pretoria. She gets to jump him for nothing and hear him cry when he comes. That way she gets out of five hundred bucks for loitering. They can't bust us for sex unless they get proper proof. Photos of us stuck together or something. So they bust us for hanging on the pavement, instead.

Don't worry, the cops round here know their rights. Spread your legs or they chuck you in jail.

The boy's got Metal playing low. Shaved sides, a pile of curls left on top, like a monk. I tell him one hundred bucks. He sucks air, nods. 'Not in the car,' he says, all nervous, 'Everyone knows my Beetle.' His voice is wobbly, but deep. He's older than his baby skin says. 'My mom's working overtime. She's a nurse.' Like I'm interested.

Tells me he works at Musica. 'What music are you into?' he asks. 'Ag ... everything.'

I haven't got any music, but I keep it in my head. Must be from my dad. My real dad, I mean.

'Rock,' I say.

'What artists?'
I shrug. 'Females.'

Musica cuts the clack-clack engine and we freewheel into his drive.

It's a witch's house. A double storey, the top floor put on skew, creepers tryna climb in the windows. A black cat, looks like its nose's been dipped in white PVA. Another ginger one with popout eyes. They jump off the stove, leave a nest of hairs. There's a trail of golden syrup going from a tin, over the edge onto the floor. A troop of ants stuck there, in their line. Photos on the fridge. A black haired woman in a nurse's uniform, her hands held out like she's gonna catch. The same woman drinking beer with friends. A monster pink fish on a fire, looks like a grunter. A close up photo of Musica with her. Black hair hangs long, over her breasts. Her eyes are pinker than the fish, from the flash. The same shaggy fern from their kitchen. Her hand on his neck riddled with rings. Musica's laughing. The black haired woman balances a smile. They both have brown eyes.

There are swirling things in the lounge. A hanging number like a mad queen's hat. I speed up, sheez, it could land anytime. I try touch the ginger cat, but it shrinks. The black cat makes a game of stalking me. Musica rushes up some squeezed stairs, bangs on some loud music. The words all mashed, the sound of smashing steel. The black cat streaks past me, disappears. I go slowly up the stairs, try figure out a painting on the wall. I'm thinking it's a mountain fire, spitting sparks, bursting pods, when I feel this burning on my shin. The black cat's wrapped around my leg, cutting me with razor blades. 'Shit! Shit! Shit!' I kick hard. The cat flies off, hits the wall. Sheez, I'm dripping blood into my takkie by the time I get up the stairs.

His shirt's already off. A bunch of poodle curls on his chest. His skin's like weak coffee inside his t-shirt tan. 'Shoeshine!' he shouts when he sees the blood. He stumbles out.

Metal teeth sawing on the CD. Aloes in pots hang from the ceiling. They thrust up stiff, shoot out needles. On the wall a poster of a skraal Metal dude. He's shrunk to tiny, creeping out

a huge eye socket. Musica shouts something from his bathroom.
I stick my head in the door. 'What?'
'Shoeshine. She never had a mother, so she never learned to
keep her claws in.'
'Flippin killer cat.'

Musica likes the skin on skin, likes the stroking stuff, but he's
scared of my hot spots. He won't touch my breasts or my fanny.
When he goes in, he shudders.

On the CD, some aggro oke screams stuff to his chick, like, Hey,
gimme your fat, I wanna feed it to my big fat cat.

I start feeling shaky halfway through the job. It's the Syndol,
wearing off.

The singer shouts, like, Ja, it's just another screw her and lose
her situation.

I try a trit-trot on his hips, like I'm rich enough for riding lessons.
The ginger cat lands, kneads the bed around his head. I keep an
eye on it. Check the door for the black cat. It takes a long, long
time to get an orgasm out of him. It's watery and weak, but
does that boy smile. Leaps off to the toilet, past his spiky cats
and his dangling aloes.

The singer's upset, the chick just ate the cat. She spat out a
furball and gapped it to the bank.

I zip the bucks into my flat cloth bag. Sling it over my bra. Pull
on my shirt. I'm glad I charged him extra. Covers my kaalgat,
plus the torn skin on my shin. I tell him, 'You do it very nicely.
But there's a chance you're actually gay.' I know these ous.

His face goes pink, swells up like he's poisoned. He nods a
tiny nod, then breathes out his whole life, maybe. His voice is
weirdly handsome, like someone else's talking through him.
'Okay.'

I wanna get to the chemist. Someone's loosened my joints,
unscrewed them. This useless lurking feeling, it pisses me off.
I hate the feeling that something's coming. Let it come, I'll kill
it. It's not like I'm hooked. I'm not like some of the girls on
the road, killing themselves slowly with mandrax. Smashing

their lights out with white pipes. Their biggest mission to hit the deck hard, go unconscious. That's like heaven to them. They come with black bruises, cuts from the floor punching them. I'm not like those girls. And I'm not like the begging bergies on the beach who'd crawl after wine on flippin bleeding knees if they had to.



I wait for the usual pharmacist to go to lunch. The tired one. She's always exhausted, from fighting viruses, pollen clouds, fighting the rot the South Easter brings. Tired, maybe, of tryna keep the pensioners alive. She gets into her Datsun, avocado green.

I walk through blue light from the stained glass window. The new guy's only served me twice, but the counter girl must've said something. He's not happy when I ask for Syndol. He's got a white coat and a hole in his nose. He's so pale it's like he squirmed out of an egg and he's still gotto grow another layer of skin. I stand in the slab of sunlight in front of the dispensary. Lie easily. 'Bad, bad period pains. Shocking.' I press my fingers into my stomach. He scratches his empty piercing. Blushes a bit. Dispenses.

I'm at Mays café chasing my pills with seventy percent orange juice, paging through the Fair Lady. I'm gonna live long cause they say here that sex keeps you young. And walking. I can't buy the mag. I've got a pink fifty stashed in my bag, but that's the day's rent. After the Syns and the juice I've got two rand something in the palm of my hand. And a sweet, relaxed feeling coming on.

A Congolese honey whistles from outside. Calls me with a twitch of his head. I've seen him round town. He's double my height, skin like a seal's. A French accent. 'My friend wants to pay you.'

One more jump and that's me for the day. No need to go back to the road.

We go round the corner to the barber shop. Some men stretch out the door, watch us coming. One oke sinks back, hides out. They nudge him, punch him. Snigger.

I go straight in.

A line of men on plastic chairs, facing a long strip of mirror. Polished shoes, shocking white teeth. Their t-shirts like flags on their black skin. On the walls, photos of shiny black guys in good clothes. Hair climbs up the barber's wrist as he shears it. Henrique's in the chair, the refugee oke from my block. He tries to look away, but the mirror catches him. I ignore him, go up to the oke who's tryna hide. He's short, tinted a bit yellow. Black wisps on his lip. Sweating. The buzz of the haircutter stops. The barber's got a whole peeling of black hair parked on his shoe.

'You got a room?'

'Whoaaa,' the men roar.

The tall guy answers, the one who fetched me from the shop.

'He's got a room, go with him.'

'You got money?'

'He's got money.'

Some oke calls in that French rhythm, 'It's his birthday.'

The man shrugs, smiles. As we leave, I point to Henrique. 'He lives in my block. I told him, not in my block.'

They slap Henrique on the back, squeal like boys. Henrique hangs his head, proud.

Henrique collects the rent for the landlord. He came to my door the other morning, nowhere near rent day. Clean shirt, clean trousers, like he was gonna go play golf. He kept his voice low, tryna get me before the others woke up and started babbling on the phone, breaking wind, you know, fixing up yesterday's stew. 'Not for men who stay here.'

Something glittery got into his eyes.

'Not in my block.'

His lips went into a pink curl. 'Ah. White girl.'

'Don't be stupid, man, I sleep with all colours. But not in my block.'

I shut the door on his face, his big hands lifted up too late.

On the way to his place, I tell Birthday Boy a hundred for a jump.
He stops dead.

'Fifty for a blow job.' I open my mouth, point into it.

'Thirty,' he bargains.

The South Easter's dried the sweat on his temples. A beach bergie shoves a piece of paper in my hands. He's got a wide face and a mile wide gap between his teeth. He stinks of vrot wine, but he stands straight, like a flippin official. The paper says Shark Spotter Fund. They're tryna raise money for okes to park on the mountain and watch for fins in the sea. Ring a siren for whoever's dumb enough to be in it. I check out the sea, get the creeps. God knows what's under that boiling foam.

I tell the jump, 'Fifty, or forget.'

I follow Birthday Boy up some sticky stairs. The building sways like it's gonna faint. They say they're gonna bulldoze all these old flats. They say Muizenberg's gonna go yuppie.

A boy and girl slide down the stairs on their stomachs. The boy grabs her ankle, she bangs her lip on the stair. Fat little plaits, bleeding mouth. She kicks the boy in his face. He chucks himself on her. They scream like fighting cats. I pull the boy off. He runs outside like a windup toy, chases a teenager on a skateboard, grinding past. The little girl asks me for money. But I'm watching the jump. Double checking his eyes. So far I see clean. Careful. A Congolese nerd. But he could be a war vet, used to cutting off boobs.

Birthday Boy opens a splintered door. I see black braids, women talking nonstop. He shuts the door quick-quick. Hurries me to a door at the end of a passage. High up windows, milky from sea air. Stinks. It's the flippin toilet. He slips in, feels along a ledge. Pours Jeyes Fluid down the bowl. Shuts the lid. He agrees, 'Fifty,' and sits on the lid.

I check the lock's already torn off before I go in. My eyes water, my nostrils sting as I notch up the rands, nod my way to a round figure. When I look up, I see the Jeyes Fluid's got him too. He's sniffing and rubbing his eyes. His broken up breathing, I take it, has got something to do with me.

Downstairs, some bergies lean up against the ablution block wall, out the wind. All their clothes packed on their bodies. When I get close I see it's Randall and Muffy. A white giant and a puffy coloured woman. Her cheeks, her swollen body, all pulled in at her rumpled mouth. Next to them, an evil looking oke. Something dirty in the air, like he's smoking, but he's not. He waits, one foot up against the yellow wall. Tattoos like broken veins on his face. They creep up from his collar, out of his sleeves. Top lip tilted. Too little lip skin from a scar. It's not a cleft palate, it's a knife split, fixed. A sly kind of guy. Watching the cars. Watching Bonita.

Bonita's in the middle of the beach circle. Flinging crumbs for a whole gang of pigeons. She's in a painful pink dress, the South Easter tryna rip it off. Tryna snatch her Pick n Pay packet. I knuip, stay far from the birds.

'When you fetching the girls?' I shout into the wind. Knuip as the sea gulls dip. The wind loosens their belly feathers, lifts them like scales.

'They've got netball,' she shouts back. As she sends crumbs up into the crowd, she shows me with her eyes. A white Cressida. An old man sits up straight, bird watching. No muscles in his mouth.

One more jump, in other words.



On our wall it says, False Bay Holiday in metal letters. I know where the missing word is. There in Military Road, at the tyre repairs there's a ramp. A whole pile of tyres. They've got our missing word, Flats, nailed onto the fence. The stairs of our flats are steep and stained. A low greasy line from kids' fingers. The building smells of boiling bones. I'm on the first floor in the corner. As I turn the key I remember. Shit. The bird.

A coat of sand in my hair. Dry eyes. The tuc-tuc-tuc of a machine next door. The new family from DRC.

I squeeze my cheek against the glass, check the corner of the balcony. Some feathers at the mouth of the runoff pipe. But no bird. It looks like the South Easter's sucked it up back out. I flatten a glass of Coke. Run a deep bath. Lie there, dreaming.

Maybe I'll be a fashion editor. No chance of being a model. I won't crack the shining eyes, sweetheart look the girls have got in the mags. Like God's knitted into their jersey. A genie in their flippin lipstick. No, I'll be an editor, rather. I'll stay in a cottage on the mountain, not a flaking flat with one room. A wardrobe so dark and heavy it's like a dead horse in the corner. No. I'll have a kingsize bath, and rows of stuff in green tubes, imported face and body stuff. I'll go to work in my Jetta, my briefcase in my boot. My hair rippling from a special mask that costs the same as two jumps. I'll put on too much makeup and frighten myself, but I'll have the whole drive to town to rub some off with my fingers. I'll have those popup tissues on my dashboard. Wear bambi coloured jackets and skirts. I'll be meatier by then, my breasts will be bigger, a cup full of milk on each side. When I walk into work I'll bring in fresh air from my good nature. I'll smell like some plant that flowers at night. I'll go on a shoot or two. Order pizza and beg the models to eat a just a tiny slice. I'd be like a mother to them.

The photographer will waste film on me as I check the clothes, cruise outside to get a better line on my cell. He'll have clean, long hair and long fingers, good for picking out splinters, good for drying glasses right to the inside. He'll whisper to me that he wants to marry me.

I scrub myself squeaky clean. Inside and out. Shave myself smooth, rub on some cream. Climb the ladder to my loft, it's a brick ledge the size of a double bed. I've got a silly, thin mattress up there. I clip my new Syns out of their foil. Put them in my fertility doll. Angie gave her to me after I left home. She's mud brown wood with a natural light streak that runs across her face, wraps around her big, sticking out belly. She's got an egg head. Rickety legs. Ange didn't even know about the hinge. Me, I found it straight away. Just under the swell of her stomach. I hooked my nail into it and its belly fell open. Nice and hollow.

I lie on my stomach, read about Helen for the hundredth time. The book's mine now cause I'm banned from the library. They sent me a letter, Return it or you're banned. Well, stuff you too. Helen was an artist, this crazy bitch in the desert. She got a local oke to make concrete sculptures in her garden. Elastic camels and stretched men leaning, straining towards God knows what. Lots of fat owls with headlight eyes. And begging mermaids with their hands up, saying, Love me, please love me. She had bottles and bottles of smashed glass in her pantry to rub into them while their cement was still wet. She's famous, old Helen. Crazy bitch of the desert. She killed herself with caustic soda. Took flippin ages to die. She might as well have swallowed her own broken glass, she suffered so much.

She didn't move out that Owl House. I'm reading again how she watched the sun and the shadows on her sculptures all day, when this weird little growl comes from down there. Eesh. I don't think skollie, I think rat. Or insect. Something with spiky legs, a crispy collar. Maybe even wings. I creep down the ladder. Open the door, so I can run if I have to. I bend, shade my eyes from the sun coming in. Under the bed, there's a small, black shadow. My slow, slow heart changes gear. Starts racing the next door machine. Shit. The bloody bird's got in! He lines me up along his curved beak. Rattles off a whole lot of head moves. My bladder cramps. A bit of wee wants to come out.

I'm gone. Slam the door. Flap around, scared. The room next door's wide open. The Congolese woman's winding a manual sewing machine, tuc-tuc-tuc. She's got old man's glasses on, a thick black frame. She's decked in orange, working clouds of shiny green cloth. Her skin's like the skin of a black fruit.

'A bird flew in.'

I go right inside. There are weird white flecks in her brown eyes. They're way too big, till she takes her glasses off.

'In your room?'

'Under the bed.'

In the silence, the silky fabric starts to lump and slide. A knotty haired little boy comes out of it.

'Noel and I will take it out.' She says something in French African. The boy's up and hanging off her orange dress. Ready for action, using his mom's legs for cover.

I wait outside, hang my jaw to open my ears. Watch my thin, shiny shins. It's late afternoon, the couldn't-care-less sounds of African jazz comes from upstairs. Shit. Inside, the cracking of feathers. Blasts of flight. I go to the woman's balcony. Twist over the bum high wall. Try see. My balcony door's hooked open. The woman's waving my broom around. The gull's diving away, flying crazy lines. The boy's nearly under my bed. The bird whacks into my Scratch Patch poster, the one with the precious stones. The poster whips sideways, hangs upside down.

Suddenly, everything's still. The boy shoves his legs further under the bed. I'm stoked he's scared. It's not just me, see? My ladder looks brittle under his mother. The broom slips from her hand, drops with a crash. She stops at the top, stares into the loft. Her and the bird eyeball each other. She turns her head and waves slo-mo towards outside. I see she's speaking. The gull flies smooth, right over her head, ducks under the doorway. I fall back on my haunches, watch him glide. He lands on the gutter of the building opposite. Blu Bottle Discount Liquors. The sun's gone from the sky behind him. He's a bird shaped shadow, facing me.

'Go. Go.'

I mean, he's got the freedom of the flippin city.
But he's going nowhere.

'Thanks, man.'

She tells me her name's Madeleine. They just moved up from Church Street. She thinks she's my friend now, wants to make me coffee, but I say, 'No, don't worry.'

She leaves the cupboard door hanging open. Instead of food and stuff there's a whole shock of sunglasses in there. Tangled, black. She checks me looking. 'We sell at the market.'

'Here?'

'Muizenberg on Sunday. On Saturday, Greenpoint.'

‘Okay.’

I know Greenpoint. I joined Heavenly Escorts when I first came to Cape Town. When it got quiet, we walked past the African curios. Past the old men’s heads, the elephants, right to the Health and Racquet Club. We posed there in the parking lot, full of MGs and open top Mercs. Watched our regulars up there in the glass gym, shunting and pumping for glory. We got ready, looked dead sexy when they stopped to dry off their sweat, change their weights. We went to remind them, our lunch time men, Hey, honey, you’re due for a spin.

At my flat I roll up my poster, chuck it in the trunk. Up in my loft, it’s streaked with gull shit. I wipe it up, open the doll. Take two pills from tomorrow’s breakfast bunch. Just two, for the fright. I don’t take painkillers cause I’m sick. I don’t pretend, tell myself I’m in pain. I’ll tell you straight, I take the stuff to feel good. My job takes guts. The stress builds up. I’ve upped my dose, cause just before Christmas they killed Amanda, from the road. She was hyped, maybe on uppers. No front teeth, long, long legs. She had the bod, you know the right shape against the vibracrete, but she didn’t even need to do sexy moves. She was just dead friendly. The kind that gets a prize in school for being kind. At our school they called it, Living Out the Christian Principles. Amanda had the bod, but she got her guys by fluttering her hands and chat, chat, chatting. Shit, some guy split her from her throat to her belly button. Popped out her eyes. Left her buried in the sand at Clovelly. Some mom was collecting sand for her kid’s sand pit. Dug up her loose eye. The cops went and dug up the rest, but they didn’t bother to try find the killer. They didn’t even come question her pimp.

What I’m saying is it’s a heavy job. I take pills to unwind. To feel a bit easy, breezy. To keep doing it, keep on my feet. Hit the road, face the bloody sun. Work the okes, come home with bucks. If I’d finished school, I might have done something clever. But now there’s not a lot I can do, and don’t ask me to work at the Seven Eleven. So I don’t lie to myself, say I’m in pain. I lie to the pharmacists, fine. Not to myself.

It's not like I've gotto have the Syns. I just *want* them. I wanna operate, not lie flat on my back. Deadly bloody duvets up to my chin. No thank you. I'll hit it hard, then I'll die. Not lie round wondering when, like you, Ma.

Like you used to. Ange says you're up now, out of bed. Fishing full time. Going for that twenty kilo cooter, or salmon, or rock cod. She says you were cured by Graham's stroke. It's like you've swapped. Ange says Graham's half dead. Parks his wheelchair in the darkest corner of the lounge, where there's less reflection on the TV.



Just after the gull, I find Princess.

First I go up the mountain with Hanif, the cop. He picks me up. Moslem with hair so black you can see rainbow colours. He drives the police van up, up, up along a fire break. Up over a koppie, there where the shark spotter's binocs can't bend round the rock. Hanif makes me duck under the dash, just in case. He opens my hand on the seat, presses a twenty and a ten into it. 'It's all I've got on me.'

Its buggin all, but it saves me five hundred for loitering.

He leaves his radio on, screens the calls. The radio says there's been a car theft, Hanif says, 'My van's too slow.' There's a mugging in town, Hanif says, 'That's a Chubb street.' Chubb's private. The rich people pay cause the police are so useless. Like now, shit going down and I'm standing, stark raving naked on a rock shelf with a police sergeant. A million years ago it held a boulder, now a dry pot hole holds a policeman's bum. As usual, Hanif keeps his clothes on. He's lined the hole with his beaded seat cover. Says the seat cover calms him on his callouts. There are black butterflies everywhere. Fine, cause they're light flyers, no chance of them thwacking against my skin. I keep my boots on. Land on Hanif like I've dropped out the air. While he's grunting and grinding into his stress beads, I watch a pair of

black eagles faraway, flying circles round a shaft of rock. They must be nesting there.

He shoots his rocks off.

'You'll have to walk down, alright?' He doesn't wait for an answer. Before he gets his pants up properly I see his waffle bum, riddled with bead dents. He does up his fly, gets in his van. Off to investigate a hit and run.

I blend in with the butterflies. A black leather skirt from the second hand shop, cracking a bit at the hem. A leather vest with buttons for show. Mockcroc boots, raw at the toes. I stay away from heels, but these boots give me legs to heaven. They're too hot for summer, though. And dumb for mountain hikes. I pull them off, wash in a stream down near Boyes Drive. The sea below is still foam, still stunned from last week's wind. I go straight down the hill, between fancy English flowers and bloody mountain mansions. When I get to the stone church on Main Road, I see it's twelve noon on the clock. An hour to go, but call it lunchtime. Maybe there's water behind that carved wooden door. I'll take my pills, there in the shadow.

I get my Syns out among the candle stubs. I'm looking for water when the priest comes out. Gives us both a helluva fright.

'I just came to look.' Like, I'm not here to buy.

'Of course.' His voice is like a girl's.

His head's too big for his body, sways in figure of eights as he smiles. He seems to have more teeth than he needs. His hair is flicked back, silver. I take little steps, hold my boots behind me. Look around like I'm at an art show. The pills get wet in my palm. A stained glass lady with a veil and a baby bounces blue light, red light onto the benches. I go deeper in, towards a little stage with a bible holder on it. Behind it the usual spatchcock Jesus, spread like Shoprite chicken. This one white clay, no eyelids. He looks terribly clean, even his blood stains just a neat, pink dribble. My hair is greasy and I'm not properly washed. Nowhere near ready to be raised to heaven. All I want is my Syns. When I sneak a look back, the priest lands his eyes on the

polished benches, sways his teeth. Jesus, the guy needs to stop smiling.

This place is making me sweat. Feels like my leather might peel, my whole body start drip, drip, dripping in the aisle. I knuip my fanny, do a one eighty turn. But Mielie Teeth blocks my way.

‘Do you need help with anything?’

I shake my head.

‘I get the sense you have some kind of burden ...?’

He won’t move. I try nudge past. He taps my shoulder like I’m a bloody boiled egg. He cracks me alright.

I lay into him. Jab at the clean, clay Jesus with my empty hand.

‘Why do you guys go on and on and on about Jesus dying?’

Hang him all the time so you can cry about it?’

He shows me his mielies.

‘What’s the big deal? Jesus knew it was gonna happen. Like the suicide bombers, the Arabs, they plan it for ages. And they *also* do it for God.’

At last the priest’s lips come down over his teeth.

I keep stabbing, ‘It happens all the time, guys blow themselves up.’

He speaks high and slow, ‘My dear, when Jesus enters you, you know He is the only ...’

‘Look, he’s a man. I’m a chick. I don’t have a dick, or hair on my back. I don’t even smell the same. And you want Jesus to enter me? I have enough of that every damn day, thanks.’

I burst out so hard, the heavy door sticks open. I bang myself down on the pavement. Pull on my boots.

‘Poes!’ some truckers shout at me. The swear word sails over my head into the church. They lean on their hooter for half a flipping kilometre, ruining that one morning without wind.

A bit later I make fifty bucks off Samson in Tokai.

‘Hey. Is it you?’ He comes straight at me. Big baton. Security boots. ‘It’s me. Samson.’

I check out the spanking new buildings behind him. The brand new bricks in the car park. ‘What, you got a new boom?’

He nods, smiles. I know him from Newlands, when I was with Butterflies. For fifteen months I did dead, rich men. Big jobs, their days like bricks on their heads. Samson was a guard at the President's townhouse, just down the drag. A big, black guard in the white yuppie suburbs. Samson was a good husband. Never touched his salary. Paid for his blow jobs with tip money.

'You alone?' I tune him.

He checks around, goes back in his kiosk. I go in, duck down out of sight. He pays me with ten silver fives.

From a distance they look like gravestones. There's a Kentucky opposite. The parking lot's empty like no one ever eats between meals. As I get closer, the gravestones change into chalky figures. There's a weird, muscled dog behind the wire fence. A few of him. A hunting goddess, going by her bow and arrows. About three of her. Some baby angels, their bellies bulging from too much milk.

A real oke in overalls dumps a new angel in the scraggly grass, adds to the mob. Nearby's a statue of a hunk. A gorgeous naked oke in a fat, stone sulk. But it's the statue next to him that pulls my eyes. She's in a powdery, white robe. Smiling quietly at the road, like she's seeing exploding stars instead of cars. Like the Kentucky's a flippin crystal palace.

My feet are sore. I'm thirsty, I'm hot, but I'm still sweet on my Syns. I hang on the fence, check her out. Two drunks walk past, argue over an empty half jack. One chucks it, smashes it on the tar. The way she smiles, they're lovers come to bring her sparkling glass. Like she's a secret princess.

I'll have her at my pool.

I'll live with a big man. Maybe a body builder. Maybe a Joburg Jew with smooth skin stretched over big, big muscles. He'll rub white powder on his hands, pump iron in a back room. He's different to those guys at the Greenpoint gym, grunting next to each other, watching themselves. 'Gnnnn', working in front of a bloody big mirror. Okay, he's the same cause he also farms muscles, gives each muscle food to make it breed. But he depends on me to tell him, 'You're getting too big.'

'Your ankles are looking too thin,' I'll say, and he'll slow down on the leg press.

He'll give me signing power. I'll have sculptures put up at my heated pool. I'll buy the sulky stone hunk and the smiling princess. I'll float round on a big, puffy lilo. When he gets home from work he'll kiss me on the forehead. 'How was your swim?' His sex drive will be low from the stuff he takes. But when he's horny he won't just jump me. He'll come to me with special oil. He'll kneel at my feet and hold out his hands. Ask to have my foot in his palms.

'How much?' I ask the guy in overalls. He jerks his thumb at a wooden wendy house floating in long grass. There's a big, white face at the window. I wave. It goes away. I flatten my tongue with my fingers, split the road sounds clean in half with a whistle. A man steps out, smooth and plump, stuck to his hand, a polystyrene box. Oily slap chips go box, fingers, mouth, box, fingers, mouth.

'How much?' I point at her with my boot. She looks past, smiles.

He comes closer, spits chips, 'All between three and four.'

I bend down, look into her patient, grey eyes.

I want her. Badly.

A red and cream Carmen Gia ramps the curb, swerves, stops. Idles like a flippin lawnmower, blowing black smoke. The little car rolling with boy students. Elbows, twitchy eyebrows. You know, good teeth. Their fear smells like earthworms. Plus yeast from their Dutch courage beer.

'How much?' The redhead at the wheel's got serious, red eyes. A dry throat, his lips pulled up like a nervous dog. The dark boy on the back seat's already got a hard on. I can tell by the way his skin shines, the way he swallows like he's downing raw egg. Another huge oke, curly brown hair, face cut in a block. Full of giggles.

'Buy it for me.' I tap her head. 'The stone lady. Three hundred bucks.'

They're confused.

'We can put her in the boot ...Then find some nice, soft grass.'

But they've got golf clubs in the boot, maths notes and clothes.
The red head explains, 'Ox is moving digs.'
The big oke says, 'But we got waylaid by the Red Parrot.'
'Waylaid, ha ha ha.' The shiny oke goes on a bit long.
Ox adds some maths. 'About ... twenty three kilometres off our course.'

I never, ever do groups. Not since that navy oke broke my arm.
These boys are pack dogs, but they're as green as the overgrown grass at the Princess's feet. So me and the Princess squeeze against the window on the back seat. We sit quietly, not one unladylike laugh. The boys drink like pigs on the way, guzzle beer like they're going to their flippin death.
We stop in a nice, neat graveyard. Nothing like the one on the M5. There's money for big headboards in these bloody beds, money to trim the nice, green blankets. Far, far away, a guy works a weed eater.

Princess watches us through the windscreen.
I pay for her one at a time. The redhead chickens out. Sobers up too fast, sits worrying on the back bumper. We do it behind a huge headstone, some girl who died when she was six. 1970 to 1976. 'Our Darling, Our Light.' Four years before I was born. The big oke, Ox, is quite out of it. Hefty beef shoulders, beef flanks, sits slack against a tree, drinking some more. Shiny Face is hyperactive. 'We might as well do it all, hey Ox? We might get shot tomorrow at the ATM. If Bush carries on with his shit, we could be totalled by a radioactive cloud. If the wind switches to North.'

Ox nods, his elbow slips off his knee.

'Don't watch, Ox, you'll make me anxious.'

Ox laughs a slow, gurgling laugh.

Shiny Face is premature. Talks through his oops. 'We might as well go all the way, hey Ox? Why not?' He zips up. He hasn't spoken to me once. Not even thanks. Ox's not sure, but Shiny Face pushes him, 'Be a man, Dan. Be a man.'

Geez, Ox nearly breaks my spine, collapses on top of me before he even starts. There's no chance of me going on top, not with another ou watching. Men are like that. Shiny Face talks all the way through, 'Not bad stock, she can carry you, Ox.' I turn my head, give him a dirty look. Try brace my back. Ox slurs, 'Sorry sweetheart.'

They smoke a joint in the car afterwards. I take some tokes cause it's late. Nearly time for my big five. Princess handles the smoke, graceful. She must have put a good word in for me while I was busy, cause the redhead offers me a lift home. I'm stoked cause I'm hanging for my Syns. Twenty minutes to Muizenberg, twenty minutes to easy sweet.

I make him drop me a block from my flat, cause I don't trust guilt in a growing boy. The coloured oke from number twenty two lugs the Princess in. Me saying nicely, 'If you drop her, I'll kill you.' He goes for the balcony. I shout 'No!' a bit loud.

I climb the ladder, tell him to pass her up. But she's too bloody tall. I lug her down, scraping skin, shaking. I stagger past him. Shunt her in the corner. 'She's sick of the sun.'

I nudge him out. He goes slowly like he's expecting something. Then I climb up, away from that fat sunbeam in the flat. Have my sweet snack from the belly of the doll. I chill with my statue, just like Helen of the desert.



I come across Evil again.

It's the same day that Musica comes back. When Musica pulls up, I think I'll go, so long as he locks up his cats. He gets right out the car, holds his breath like he's gonna propose or something. Drops a CD on the tar. Picks it up. His curls are waxed stiff to spite the South Easter. He hands me a whole pile of CDs. Annie out on a jump, Natasha and Aisha staring from their yield sign.

'What, you haven't got cash?' but I smile cause they're watching.

'It's to say thanks.' He looks serious. 'I got you Avril Lavigne and Dido and Evanescence. I wanted to get you Ferdie but ...'

'What for?' I smile for Natasha and Aisha.

'Just sommer.'

I shrug. 'It won't get you free sex.'

He tries to hide his hot cheeks with his hands. 'Man, I'm just saying thank you.'

'Ohhh.' I get it then. 'For saying you're gay?'

He stares at his black laceups.

'Sheez, that's nothing.'

He walks to his Beetle, all awkward, his arms and legs going wrong. As he gets in, the wind whips his smile skew. I've got a new friend, whether I like it or not.

I leave the CDs at the garage. The mechanic there keeps stuff for us cause he's into Annie, thinks he's in with a chance.

My last jump's scared of gangsters hijacking him in the bush, so we go all the way to the Marina picnic park. A salesman from Bloemfontein. Bit of a dirty number. Blackheads in his ears, for God's sake. Glasses that turn his eyes to goldfish. An old man goes past the car with something small on a leash, so we get out and go into the bush. It stinks like hell, but there's a nice, thick bush and a dip in the ground from two bodies rocking. It's weird cause there are white houses across the water, facing us straight with blind, flashing windows. All they can see is the bush moving, like there's birds nesting in it. But it's just me, rocking for my supper.

I make the ou drop me off in St. James, half a kay past my flat. He says I look like his very first girlfriend. I tell him, 'Trust me. It wasn't me.' Before he drops me off he asks where he can find me at night.

'I don't work in the dark, dork.' I duck off the road, in case he chucks a u-turn and tries to find me. I stick to the concrete path along the sea, watch it grab at the land, tryna settle its foam. A train comes past like an axe, cuts the land off from the sea. Screeching, full of strop. I'm nearly at the dip in the path, there at the subway, when I see a guy standing in the shadow. His hands in his pockets. His pants rolled up, skraal calves. He's

wearing Nikes, skollie brand. His head sags back like he's tripping a bit. He's got a side fringe, a snub nose. Piggy nostrils pull up his top lip. As I go closer, I see the kink. And the ink lines on his skin. It's the tattooed guy from the beach. The same ugly air around him.

I stop, lean against the rail. Make like I'm looking at the sea, slide my eyes sideways. Flick off my shoes, one in each hand. The CDs are already rolled in my jacket, the sleeves tied. I'm ready to run, but I stare straight at him instead. His eyes inside are black spinning clouds, flippin horrible. But I whip my fear into anger, an old trick. I let it hassle my spine, up and down, up and down, a dog on a wire. I walk past him, straight through his sneer. Right through the dip. I'm safe on the straight. I turn, walk backwards. Hold him back. Get the hell out.

The wind comes front, side, back. It feels like he's following me. Up past Bailey's Cottage. I think he's after me. He is. The wind's in my body now, gusting. I'm shit scared, I dunno why. I bang creeps every day.

Just after the thatch roof of Bailey's, I pass a square old bag with a hunch. Misted up glasses and a cross terrier. Fat little dog on a leash. 'Come on Esprit,' she nags the dog, tryna stop him from doing legups.

I go over the rise, run a few steps. Force myself back to a walk. Suddenly the air behind me goes slack.

Shit.

The bulky old bat. And Esprit.

I run up the bank, onto the railway line. Jump the space between the sleepers. Scoop a handful of stones, run the line till I spot her behind Bailey's. The old girl's spread on the path. Esprit's paws on her back, licking her ear.

'What's it?' I shout.

She turns her head, sniffs the wind. Blood runs from her scalp. Her glasses are gone.

'What happened?' I ski down the bank. 'It was that flipping guy, wasn't it?'

She starts to cry. A tired, toddler sound. She's ruined, shaking. I swing round a full circle, snarling, add my own weird sound to her crying. My heart beats my knees as I crouch down, rub her hunchback. Esprit jumps at me, blood on his tongue. 'I know who did it. Don't worry. I saw the guy. Come.'

She can't get up. She's like set in the cement.

'I can't see.' She cries some more. Grips onto me like she's in a current. I shove off the licking Esprit, twist my wrist out of her flippin steel grip. Check all around, a growl still in my throat. Her glasses are under a bench with some cigarette butts. Cracked. She hangs them on her face. Her sight shocks her to think. 'My rings, love. My watch!' Only then I check the horrible scratches on her arms, her hands, evil lines of missing skin.

It's like moving furniture tryna get her into Bonita's flat. The girls run up, call Bonita down. We push and pull her up the stairs, like moving a flipping fridge. The flat is full of snoek air. Snoek getting lekker burnt. Bonita gets some chocolate from deep in the bedroom. Gives some to the old bag. Gives us all a block, sticks one in her mouth, 'For the shock,' she says.

What a joke. Bonita's been throttled, stabbed, chased by a gang.

She dials the police. Lets it ring till the end of its life. Tries again. And again. When they answer, she gives me the phone. I speak low and hard. Mustn't let them know it's me. I recognise Constable Chandler, she arrested me once for soliciting. I know her little knife eyes. Her interest starts nice and high when I say, 'There's been an attack.'

It fades when I say, 'She's got a cut in the head.'

'No, she's conscious, but she's in bad shock,' switches her off.

All she says is, 'No van.'

When I put the phone down the old bat says clearly, suddenly grown up. 'My car key. He took it from my pocket.' She pokes a claw at the window. 'He took my Toyota.' She starts crying again, like a small kid that's lost its mother.

Bonita gets onto the phone. Also changes her voice. Stands there in a black flouncy skirt blotched with orange pansies. A

scar like a bicycle tyre up her calf. Criss cross stitch scars. She was up on Ou Kaapse Weg with a new regular. She's got quite a tight life, you know with the girls. She sets tight rules. Mornings only. Regulars only. She was busy with this new regular, who slammed her down, hung her head out the car door. Pulled out a cardboard cutter. Everyone made jokes after September Eleven but I'm telling you, those cutters cut you like butter. He hung her out, tryna cut her throat so she'd bleed on the grass. But she kned him or something and the cutter swiped up, cut off the tip of her nose. No jokes, the tip's missing. Gone. It's got a flat end. Bonita ripped herself out from under him, but he grabbed her foot. Looked into her eyes and cut through her muscle, right to the bone. She said she hopped like it was the mother's race at sports day. The pig went after her. Bonita's got a helluva voice, she must've moved rocks with her screaming. Thank God for the guy in khaki. All dolled up to track the baboons. Veld hat, water bottle, sun cream. A volunteer baboon monitor. Instead he got screaming Bonita.

She had the bastard's number plate. She's got a good brain for numbers. I can ask her any of her regulars, she rattles off their registration. But the police did bugger all. Bugger all. It's not legal, you see, to go and lie on the mountain for money. So mad pigs can slice us like flipping polony.

Bonita's crafty. She says on the phone, in a university tone, 'One of Councillor Drummond's neighbour's has had her car stolen. She says the Councillor will bring her up to the station if you don't come ...' Then, 'Thank you. Surfer's Corner ... That's right. See you, dear.'

I give the CDs to Bonita's girls. They're stoked. Sharonne takes Avril and Dido to the room. Josie sticks Evanescence on their little player, goes back to her horse riding. She's made stirrups with an old leather belt. A skipping rope for reins, tied to an old oil heater. She trots on the back of their stuffed up brown couch, keeping up, maybe, with the white horses in the sea.

I go watch Sharonne plaiting her hair. 'Here, let me do that. I'm hot with hair.'

'Uh-uh. Nooit.' She grabs her mirror and runs into the bathroom.

'Come on,' I tease her outside the door. 'I'll make it like mine.'

'Nooit! No thanks.'

She can't believe my hair. I scrunch it, just about Chinese bangle it to get it to lift. She stretches her hair. Binds it tight to make it quiet. She's weirdly neat, this kid. Her clips in a line on the table. The table scrubbed bald, I swear. Bonita picked that table up on the pavement. I remember, it had Solly is my soul mate and Scum scratched on top. Sharonne scrubbed it raw with Goldilocks, extra strong steel wool.

There are three beds in the room, hers is the one that looks bandaged. Pulled so tight there's no chance of a wrinkle. Bonita says she's been like this since Bonita split from their dad. When Sharonne was two she started storing stuff in plastic bags. Shoprite bags rolled up tight. Her toothbrush, her crayons. Her shoes, even. Said she was keeping them clean.

I take out my extra Syns. Check I'm alone. It's a bit early, but with all the drama, there's no harm. I chuck them back, swallow. But they get stuck in my pipe and I've got to get to the kitchen tap fast.

Evanescence is quite cool. She asks, like, Help me, wake me, it's so dark inside me. I dance a bit, stare at the old woman's cut. Her scalp's like rubber through her wispy white hair. She nods as Josie jogs the couch with her trotting. Evanescence sings, like, Help me, help me, I don't wanna be a nothing. Bonita unsticks the burnt snoek from the pan.

Downstairs, the beach preacher's by the showers as usual. His arms and legs too long for his black suit. His bible too heavy for his bony wrists. Mad in the head, he doesn't make sense. I open the window a bit.

'God will bring terrible things. He will break up the ground. He will bring down the sky. God will burn us so our skins come off, like ... like ...' He watches a plastic bag blow against a surfer's leg. '... like a plastic.'

Another surfer under the shower, the water blowing sideways. He stares at the preacher like he must be dreaming.

'The woman at the house she goes out and she drinks. The husband he gets very angry. He beats her up. God will beat him. God will beat her. When God comes again, he will beat them all. He will show the ANC. And the IFP. Even Buthelezi. Even the Democratic Alliance. Everyone. Even the drug dealers. Even the prostitutes ...'

Geez. My TV's not keeping him home.

Randall and Muffy, the bergies, are going through the bins in the car park. Some kid just ditched his chips and I know why. It's that sick sauce they chuck on the chips at the surfer's snack van. Looks like the blood of a lamb, tastes like poison. Randall and Muffy scoff it. An old, silver haired surfer swerves away from their red fingers as they beg for small change. Trots away with his board, stretches his hamstrings on the sand. There's a guy standing in the circle, looking up at me.

'There he is! It's him, I swear!'

Blue lines tickle out his cuffs, crawl up his neck. His thick wavy fringe, dark eyes like drills.

'It's the guy from the catwalk! Look man, Bonita, on the circle, with the tats.'

'Don't be dom, Tess. That's Merrick.'

He lifts a hand. His teeth glint like blades.

Josie says, 'Mommy's boyfriend.'

Bonita waves the spatula, smiles a smile you don't often see. She waves him up.

I keep trying, 'I swear, he's the flipping robber.'

Evil shakes his head, calls her down. She says, 'Tess, don't be dof.'

'He followed me. He attacked her.'

'Man he's always on the catwalk. He's a businessman.'

'Drugs?'

She says nothing.

'It was *him*.'

'Tess, are you on something?'

'It was *him*.'

Just then, the cops pitch up. Bonita hustles the old lady downstairs. She handles the whole thing, chats to Hanif and the Pretoria policeman. Not once does she look up or point. Cuts me dead as a witness.



Right at the end of Jan, the real trouble starts.

Flip, it's weird. I think it's the thirty first.

Hanif takes the coast road towards Mitchells Plain. Whacks through the bush, parks his cop van on a screaming steep cliff. Here even the fynbos ducks away from the wind, cause if it lifts its head, it gets a helluva haircut. Everywhere else in the bay the sea is shallow at the edges, but here the deep sea races up from the south and rams into the rock. It's chronic, this place. Wind, sea, rock. Everyone says, a hot spot for suicide.

Hanif sticks his van in reverse, snaps bone, it sounds like, to get a good view. Pays me half price, a pink one. I'm flippin glad cause it's rent day, but I hate him for making me. I can't say no to this cop, up on a suicide cliff, working his day off in my vagina. And he likes me bare, bare in the bloody bush while he stays dressed. His gun and his baton strapped on. He's perched on the back of his van, and I'm doing the up, down, us both facing the sea. I'm sweating, feeling faint, the South Easter needles my teeth, dries my eyes. I'm due for a dose.

A shadow in the water, could be a great white. I watch it till it's gone. A bright painted train slides to Simonstown. Except I know up close it's crushing and clumsy. Just like this whole business on the tail gate of the van, pistons clanging, wheels grating, gripping the metal track. I'm dying of thirst.

I shut my eyes. Try make it nice.

This middle aged man comes in a brown crimpelene uniform. Gleaming brass buttons. Shiny brown cloth, a conductor. Grey hairs sprouting from a fat man's cleavage. His fingers are thick. I think, I shouldn't, I shouldn't, he's a stupid, fat man, but he begs me to stay. So I go up and

down with the rhythm of the train, the wheels find the track, circle, lock on, riding across the swell of the sea. I shouldn't, I shouldn't, I'm way too young. But I sit and I slide, feel the piston go in, feel the ridge rubbing.

I hardly ever have orgasms, but now this chaos, notching up, up, up to a nonstop spasm, epileptic fit, a flippin stroke, must be. Shattering, scattering, I fly away. Graceful, at last, sweeping over the sea, over racing, dark shapes. They're sharks, but they can't reach me. I can fly. The sweetest feeling, like max codeine, my nerves know nothing but luxury.

That day on the cliff, I whip out of my body, have a weird, rocketing orgasm. It blasts me off the planet, I swear, for flippin daylight seconds.

And that gross fantasy, it was some kind of rope. An umbilical cord that could hang me or save me.

I didn't know then.

'Shit. Shit. Shit!'

'Hell, that's romantic.'

But Hanif's proud. He's made a prostitute come. One success he can't tell his wife about.

'Shit! The condom popped.'

It's Monday, the clinic closed at four. 'Get me home fast. I need to wash.'

Hanif's long, hooked penis checks out the ground before he pulls up his blue police pants. 'Don't be dom. I've got to fetch my wife.'

'Buy me a morning after pill.' Like, buy me a diamond.

'How much?'

'Fifty five rand.'

'Vok, no, that's nearly my take home pay.'

Bastard drops me at Sunrise beach. I go to the toilets. Lucky the attendant's outside, drinking a beer with someone. I straddle a basin, try not to splash. They chat outside. 'I said to him, My

baby, listen carefully. You got two daddies now. Gary was your first daddy. Him and Mommy made you, okay? Now Kenny's helping me look after you. So now you got two daddies. Do you understand?'

'What did he say?'

'No he was quiet. He looked all around and I could see he was thinking. Then he said, Mamie? Ja? I said. He said, Has Batman got a gun?'

The two woman hose themselves laughing.

There's no paper towel so I've gotto drip dry.

Usually when the condom pops I go to Sister Brown. When the condom pops, I make her day. She's always so glad for more proof I'm white trash. How many times can a chick need a morning after pill? I mean, how many times can she make the same mistake? She says it in her silence. In her sniff.

Last time I went for one, she said, 'Here, take some lice shampoo too.'

'What for?'

She sniffed. 'There's a lice epidemic.'

I scratched my head. 'I'm not itchy.'

She shot her eyes at my shorts. 'They don't only breed on the head.'

Bitch.

'So I'll shampoo my couch, then.'

At the flat, I rinse myself silly. Lie in my loft, think good show, girl. Another shot at Aids. Another shot at an unwanted kid. I think about these things, it's not like I'm stupid, you know. I think, if I had a kid, I'd have to keep it on a leash to keep it alive. Okay, I can see myself boiling butternut for a kid, twisting the ends off the beans. Singing along to a song, the sun streaming in. The stuff Gladys did. But I've seen how they run away from their mothers. And how they shout when they're tired. Not here. Uh-uh. Add to the screeching in the block. If I had a kid, we'd have to hang out in the park, there next to the cop station. Watch the bergies give each other drunken klaps. Split their lips

sucking meths. I'd have to keep the kid on a leash cause of the speeding trucks. No thanks, I'm not ready for a pet.

I shunt that sick train dream out of my mind. That orgasm, I reckon, was cause I'm too chilled. I've been making good bucks. And I haven't been hurt for a long, long time. I was relaxed enough to explode, that's all.



But I tension up fast.

Annie doesn't pitch at the road. One day, two days, three.

I go to Vrygrond to find her. Past women on wooden boxes babysitting their washing, so no one steals it half wet. A couple of filthy white dogs chasing each other, all crazy like it's gonna storm.

I get a hard look from Annie's dad, like I've done something wrong.

'She's in her bed.'

Annie's skin's missing. A whole lot of it. Half her face bubbled with dried blood. One eye stuck. Her one shoulder's just a red scab. She's looking at pictures in the Scoop! mag.

'Man, Annie!'

'How's this Paris Hilton chick.'

'Who got you?'

She shows me Paris Hilton's fanny lips. 'She's got vok all class.'

'Annie, man.'

'Vokken poes in the yellow Datsun.'

'That blonde oke?'

She nods. 'Rory.'

She's been with him twice. Said he was helluva sweet. 'Did he kick you?' I'm thinking of me and the navy oke.

'Uh-uh.'

Annie lifts the sheet gently. I look inside.

Her hip, her thigh's just raw meat. Around the huge wounds, black from the bleeding inside.

'Bastard.'

'He's a cunt.'

'How'd he do it?'

'On the Blue Route.' Her tears burn her stuck eye. She wipes it with the edge of the sheet. Sniffs back the rest. 'He was finished with me. So he gooi'd me out.'

'Geez.'

'I'm finished with the road.'

I don't push her. Just say, 'Sorry, man. Sorry.'

Annie roasted on the tar.

Lucky she's not dead.

Usually I'm tough, but I stay home for a day. Sorry for Annie. Scared for me. Thinking I've been lucky.

There was that oke who stalked me. I was still working from the flat, he came for a jump. Time to go, he didn't wanna leave. I had to scream and shout, get the whole building to come see. He went that time, but he kept coming back. Knocking on the door when I was busy, whispering, 'Let me in.'

'Stuff off, you stupid freak!'

He whispered through the lock, 'You whore. You unfaithful whore. I'm going to punish you.'

It's not like the police were gonna help, so I told the oke, 'Watch out! I'm with the Hard Livings. I'm gonna get my pimp to take you out.'

But the ou felt rocks. One day, when someone went, he slipped into the flat. I was bending over, still getting dressed. The bastard stabbed me in the bum. Geez, it was sore.

I took extra Syns. Cleaned it with Dettol. Put on a big plaster. Shit, it hurt to walk. All I could do was wait for the pig to come back. To whisper at my door, 'Let me in,' like a flippin wolf.

Next time he stalked me, I stalked the bastard back. All the way back to the taxi rank. I paid this street kid fifty to get on his taxi. Follow him home. See where he lives. Take me there later.

I waited outside his house in Retreat. Waited till it was full. His sister came home. His mommy came home. Maybe his wife. I don't even know who all lived there. There were only two men, somebody's husband or somebody's brother. And the pig.

I don't even wanna say his name. I walked in while they were having their supper. I pulled down my pants, pulled off the plaster. Geez, it was sore. I showed them my cut. I pointed at him. 'He did it.'

They nearly died of shock.

'I had sex with him once. He paid me the bucks. Now he won't leave me alone. Every day he's at my door with a knife.'

One woman choked, 'She's lying.'

But the pig was such a coward, he couldn't even talk.

I got out before it got ugly. I was lucky it worked. And lucky he only cut into fat, not into muscle.

But I wasn't so lucky with the navy diver.

Sheez, I'm freaked.

Ag, I get slapped up all the time. The jerks who don't wanna pay, they get ugly when I argue. But I don't wanna get chucked from a fast car. Or get cut like Amanda. Eyeballs out. Buried in the sand.

Annie was with me that time with the diver. Me and Annie still worked for Butterflies. That's where we met, Annie and me.

Three boys hired three girls. Navy okes, young. The one ou was an ambassador's son, he was Annie's. I had this tall guy, nice and quiet, black crew cut, joined eyebrows. We were eating crippled chips, dipping them in tomato sauce.

'Ooh, this one's all shagged out,' said the ambassador's son. My oke put on this deep laugh, tryna be manly. Tammy, she was sixteen, was with the third oke. He had a skew mouth, sticking up hair like too much static. Also blonde, like Annie's sweet Rory. Blue eyes with big pupils. Stank of deodorant. He kept saying, 'Bok naai!' like he had stuff all brains. Smirking and staring at my tits. It's like, these okes, they always want what their friends have got.

He banged the table, shouting, 'Bok naai! Bring me my steak!' Boasting, 'I need some protein for what I'm gonna do.'

Tammy stroked his knee. 'What you gonna do?'

He shoved some chips in his mouth, looked at me. 'I'm gonna turn you into a slap chip.'

We gobbled beers, went numb from the gums. So when he twisted my nipple, I hardly felt a thing. I stretched across the table, my elbow in a beer spill. I twisted his nipple back. Tammy whined, 'Don't do that to my baby.'

But the fight was on, right there. He snarled at me, 'Slag.'

We got really pissed. We drank till we were like the ship they were busy salvaging. Rocking and leaning. When I stood up, my feet felt too small. We managed to get into someone's white Chico. Bok Naai drove. He nearly killed us on the way. Screamed up the mountain road, whacked us against the sides. When we got to the navy barracks at the top, I pulled the ambassador's son off my breast. 'Two hundred each, or no go.'

You see, the agency got a flat fee for the date. Sex was an extra, a private deal. Tammy nodded. Annie was already outside, hooked in the armpit of my very tall boy. She backed me up, 'Ja ous, kak n' betaal.'

'Who the fuck are you?' Bok Naai drilled me. 'Who the fuck are you?'

'Something you want, so pay for it.' I was still drunk, so I had no fear. He swung, tried to klap me, but my date grabbed his arm. 'Barry, hang on. Don't hit.'

'Hit me,' I said, cause I was pissed. 'There's no way I'm moving from this car till you pay.' Sheez, that's when the door sucked open. He came at me, a flipping man missile from the side. Hit me like a truck, smashed me right over. The ambassador's son just balled up on the seat, stayed out of it. Then Bok Naai climbed up on the side of the car, kicked down with both legs. All I remember is tryna reach up, tryna pull myself up by the front seat. The pain was, like, delayed. When it came, God, it was horrible. And my arm hung funny. I couldn't grip with my fingers.

They left me staring at the dark. They played Bob Dylan in the barracks. That Forever Young song that's a prayer to God to fix things, keep things lekker sweet. Bring me a ladder so I can climb to the stars.

Ja, sure.

Annie sneaked me an ice pack. 'We'll be quick, alright?'
But it was like three hours later the girls got in, held me up
round those mountain bends. Annie whispered, 'Sorry Tess.
But I got your marcha.'
Annie swiped a wallet with nine hundred and eighty bucks in it.
Made me take it to pay for the doctor. I got expensive fibreglass
put on at the larney Constantia hospital, paid for by the jerk.
When the doctor asked what happened, I said, 'I got kicked.'
You could tell he wanted the story. But all Annie said was, 'Not
by a donkey.'

Back at Butterflies I collected graffiti, so the nurse had to cut
through signatures from all the girls, plus dumb sayings from
the okes. I hope you get better, from Samson, the security guard.
Break a leg, from Sydney, the ad man. Annie wrote Bok Naai
sucks bullets, and did a bad drawing of the blonde with a gun
at his head.

Annie's road roll freaks me out. I overdo the Syndols to try chill.
That day, I have seven in the morning. Five in the middle. But
that night, three's too little to get me to sleep. I hate upping my
Syns so easy, so I take a walk to the Seven Eleven. Top up with
four Panado. Ag, they're sweeties, man. Weak as anything.



A couple of weeks after Annie got tossed, I wake up in a panic.

It's Madeleine, wailing fit to unstick the bricks.
Her door's half open. She's slumped in a mulberry red dress on
the bed. Her strong body turned to slush, like the mulberry's
gone overripe. Henrique, the refugee who collects our rent,
touches her hair, walks away. Comes back, touches her hair.
There's green and black fabric stuck in the machine. Madeleine's
little boy sits on the bed, threads a strip of green cloth between
her toes. Someone peeps into the room with me. She's stocky,
car tyre black. Hair extensions like nylon rope. Her luminous
orange bib says, Thank you for shopping at Shoprite Checkers.

I've seen her herding cars in the parking lot. She speaks that funny French to Henrique. He says in English, 'They arrested Honorious in Johannesburg. They sent him back to the DRC.'

'Who?'

'Madeleine's husband.'

'He can just try again, can't he?' I ask.

Henrique nearly whispers, 'There was a shooting in a bar. Bemba's men killed Kabila supporters. They burnt up the bar and all the bodies, they don't know who died.' He tips his head at Madeleine. 'She thinks Honorious is dead because the people know him and Madeleine were ...' He jams a thick wrist against a big hand. The car guard says in a French accent, 'Opposition.'

Madeleine starts up her siren again.

That day I walk all the way into bloody Bergvliet to get pills cause I've gotto give the local chemists a rest. It's flippin far up Ladies Mile. One ou stops, asks if I wanna go to the forest with him. Droopy eyes, puffy fingers. Water problem, must be.

I say, 'No thanks, I'm visiting my sister.'

Angie in Bergvliet? I can't see it. Angie's up on that hill in KwaZulu Natal. Making pancakes for tourists. Pushing her husband around.

She told me that time I called her from the Holiday Inn in P.E. A whole lot of us from Heavenly Escorts got booked for a hockey tour, masters league. The old guys were out playing a match. Us girls had foam baths, did our hair. Rubbed on those free bottles of body cream, getting ready. We hit the bar fridge, polished the vodka. Hit the phone.

When it was my turn to phone, I didn't wanna look like I had no one to call. So I phoned Ange. I lied, 'A whole bunch of us came with our boyfriends. Just to party a bit, you know? Check out the beaches, the clubs.'

The girls all laughed in the background. We weren't even allowed out the hotel in case some guy's wife's sister's friend spotted him with one of us stuck to him. But Ange read between the lines.

'Don't worry Tess. We're all a bit fucked up. I mean, the other night, I hit Basil. I feel like such a mad bitch.'

'Sweet Basil?'

The girls packed up laughing, thinking I was talking recipes. But that's what I call him in my mind. Ange always makes him sound sweet as Jesus. Perfect, except for his bad leg. I suppose even Jesus got nailed.

'I just lost it. I hit him with his own crutch.'

'Ag, well ... And business?'

'Too good. The locals come all year round. I think that's why I did it. We make twenty kilos of mixture every day, Tess. You know those big nappy buckets?'

'No.'

'Two of those every day.'

Syndol's my best, but Adcodol's okay if I'm short of bucks. It's the same stuff, they say, but Syndol feels stronger, faster to me. I limp into the Bergvliet chemist. Put on a laugh. Tell them a helluva story. 'We were riding a tandem bicycle, me and my sister. This dog ran out and barked at us. Just a stupid little staffie. We fell.' Laughing, like it hurts to laugh. I still get the darting looks, the eyeball pinball, but they sell me two boxes of Adcodol. 'One for my sister.'

I sit on a swing in the park, swing, swing. Swing five into my mouth. Take a swig of Energade. Swing, swing. I swear, I'm already feeling sweet. It's all in my mind, must be.

I catch a taxi to Muizenberg. Pop in to see Annie. She's got a job serving tea at the Masque theatre. She's lasted for over a week already.

But the foyer's empty. The bar holds up its white china cups, the mirror makes double of everything. I'm dying for a pee.

The music on stage floats through the toilet wall. Flute music, the thin sound of reeds, plus a crowd of pretty bells. Annie told me it's a dance show, so I imagine tutus. I stand flexed on my legs, you can get crabs from toilet seats. The music tinkles after I'm finished. My wee's dark from too many pills. I don't flush in case I drown out the flutes. In the mirror I see skinny, freckled.

Dyed blonde growing out. Dead blonde, more like, cause my hair's all split. My two front teeth are still a bit big. But the gap between them's definitely shrinking. My eyes, green with yellow flecks. The white I burn white with Safyr Bleu drops. Neck, still spindly. Breasts, put it this way, they're no strain on my back.

I wash my hands under a trickle. The music's gone in the foyer, but I follow a carpet, find it again in the tunnel. Annie's standing at the back of the theatre. Her teeth flash white in the dark. I hang with her, watching. A man like a biology drawing on stage, black with white lines. A skull mask. Long white muscles, tendon wires painted on. He pulls back like a catty, falls forwards into a dead stop. The stage set is a zebra street crossing. There's a woman in white lycra, huddled on the pavement, tryna decide. He tips her face, gently, gently till she looks at him. Then he flies up, blurs his lines. Shows her some kind of wild time. She's tempted. Up slowly, life runs through her. She stretches, reaches for him. Follows, wants to play. He spins her, laughs at her, copies her moves. She gets tired, slows down, faints at the edge of the crossing.

'It's death,' whispers Annie.

He drags her, his love. Sluips her like a rag.

Suddenly a red figure drops from the wings. A girl in full length robot red screaming, STOP with her body. GO BACK. Drums play for the first time, go right through me. The dying woman wakes up, gets a fright. Chucks the man off. She's confused. The man begs her, Come back! But the girl in red waves and flares. Burns her, sends her the way that she came. She's safe again, but she's still watching Death's eyes, still wanting to trust him. She craves him.

At interval I see Annie's forehead's still pink from her highway roll. She wears those frilly, long usher's sleeves so you can't see the scabs on her arms. She's got a black skirt to her knees, so you can't see the missing meat on her thighs. 'Sit here,' says Annie in a way that tells me I should stay put, out the way, in my frayed jeans.

'Death isn't bad looking,' I joke as she hurries to check the china. Annie smiles at the hot water cylinder, gears up for the rush. It's a slow rush though, cause there's a lot of bent pensioners who come down the tunnel.

Annie's boss is an auntie with curls like clenched tight fingers. She's in a cream coloured blouse, like Angie's, her top button tight around her shredded old neck. She speaks to Annie under her breath, like she's talking her through a flippin emergency. Annie's perfect at this. She stands straight in her pointy shoes, pours tea for the ancient ballet fans. Slips them sugar sticks like it's a big, big bonus. Takes no bloody nonsense from the spitting urn.

A little girl helps out with some change, puts her coins on the counter. Says, 'I know these are the same as paper money. I know that.' She says to her granny, 'Our teacher taught us.' But she's miserable when Annie gives her a ten rand note, miserable to swap silver for dirty paper. Annie grins. 'We'll change it back just now, okay?'

The little girl nods, clutches the note like it's worth something now. Watches Annie like a hawk.

Two teenage girls leave an old man against the wall, give him tea. They walk away, feathery hair, creamed shoulders, duck feet. The old man drops his cup, spills all over my jeans.

'Eina!'

He pulls out a yellow stained hanky, comes at me. Mutters, 'Sorry. They're trying to kill me. They think I'm made of steel.'

I push him away, 'It's okay, it's okay.'

Annie burns me with a big warning look.

Flip, I'm innocent.

In the second part of the show, there's a green and an orange robot too. It sounds stupid, but I get caught up watching that woman cross the road again and again. Green calls to her, full of acrobatics. Orange makes her crazy with, Come. Stay. Come. Stay. She dances, but all she wants is to go with Death. And he genuinely seems to love her. I dunno why but the whole thing

strangles me a bit. I go outside, into the sun. I'd rather watch cars than a bloody love story that closes my throat. I dunno what's wrong with me.

I go back, try again.

Geez! I can't believe my ears. It's the last scene, the last sound. The sound of a flipping huge truck roaring across the stage. Just the sound, not the actual truck, cause it's just a stage. The beautiful woman, she slams flat. Road kill. I'm blown away by the dumb ending. Geez.

I get outside fast, this time to laugh. I get away from Annie cause I know I mustn't diss it. She's got her future safety pinned to the Masque. No more sex work. No more cuts and punches. Just Ceylon tea and sugar sticks.

Annie could be a ballerina herself with her tight bum and straight back, legs packed with muscle from walking the road. In the car park she lifts a foot onto a bumper. Slips off her high shoe, swaps it for a takkie from a plastic bag.

I can't help pushing a bit. 'So, you rich now?'

'Vokken thirty bucks.'

'For three hours?'

She nods. Ties her laces.

'Ja, but I meet actors and that.'

'Like who?'

'Like Darryl Dunkley.'

'Who?'

'He came to help the amateurs. They're doing Vaudeville.'

'What?'

'Vaudeville. He came to teach them to talk like the French and British and that.'

'Darryl who?'

'Darryl Dunkley. He's famous.'

Like this makes *her* famous.

'He smaaks birds. He's got a whole flock of birds inside his house.'

I'm grinning now, cause I think I've bust her. 'How do you know?'

'He *told* me, okay? In there.' She points at the empty foyer. 'He just *told* me.'

The dead dancer pulls off in a little white Uno. Annie kicks the closest car tyre. 'I'm bored,' she says. She looks up where the sun's still blazing orange on the rock. 'I'm lus to go up the mountain.' I think she means this mountain, till she says, 'Let's go to Rhodes Mem.'

We get a lift to Rondebosh. Before we get in the red BM I tell Annie, 'Supper money. It'll be quick-quick, okay?'

She shakes her head like a crazy.

'Not *you*, man. Just me.'

A hundred bucks. Tourist price. Annie gets out at Wynberg park while I bend my head and tame the snake. A German, no hair on top. Two bald heads. I stop halfway, tell him I don't swallow, so he gets a pack of Nandos serviettes. He's polite, pink, sweats along his eyebrows. Afterwards he says, 'Danke,' his voice weak, like he needs to build up his red blood cells again. I nod, watch the forest glow some last minute trick before the sun drops behind the rock. A better ending than that dumb dance show.

'Stop picking,' I say to Annie, who sits like a lady on the hill. She drops her hand from her elbow.

He drops us at the offramp. Annie takes us on a short cut through the old zoo. It's gone long ago, all that's left is foundations, cracked paths, old feeding bins. Annie's all excited cause we're walking through her past.

'When I was a laaitjie and I was onbeskof, my dad said, Watchout, I'm gonna gooi you to the lions.'

'Were there lions then?'

Annie's *still* relieved. 'Naai, man. I came to look.'

'How old were you?'

She shrugs. Looks into that time. 'Must be ... nearly ten. When they took me away from my ma.' There's a big empty echo in Annie's voice. The sound of a little girl taken away.

Annie told me before, her mom's a button head. Hooked on mandrax. Annie didn't go to school. Just went from house to house to beg. She told me she learned to give head to get bread.

But she never, ever told me she was less than ten. God, she was tiny, man. It hurts like hell under my ribs.

'So you came to check for lions?'

She points, 'We stayed in a flat down at the station.'

'Just you and your dad?'

'Him and his stukkies.' Her laugh comes out like a hiccup. 'I came up here to get out of the flat. My dad and his girls, sies, they were all over. On the table, in the bath. Never in the bleddy bed.' I laugh cause it's not like Annie ever has sex in a bed. But my heart's all tight, it nearly hurts me to breathe. My mind stuck on that tiny kid, doing sexy stuff for some supper. Then with her dad, running up, up, away from the grunts and giggles and the tricks. Stuff kids shouldn't see.

Annie giggles, 'I came to the zoo to get away from the monkeys.'

Sheez, I need a couple more Syndol.

I wish we'd asked Baldy for a lift up the hill. We walk a slant up a flippin vertical slope. Annie knows the path well. My lungs are bleeding, my legs locking by the time we get to the memorial. Stone stairs, stone lions watching, flicking their tails. At the top, Smuts's head on a platter. I fall down on the bottom stair, refuse to move. Annie checks out the early lights of the city. Finds the M3, the N2, the M5, plotting them like a scientist spotting gas balls in the sky.

'C'mon meid, get up.'

'Forget.'

She takes my hundred buck note and flies off the wall. I force down two pills from my evening dose, try sort out my shivery legs.

Annie comes back with slap chips on a real plate and a bottle of Graca wine. My unbroken hundred.

'Who'd you con?'

'The Christians at the top.'

I look up at the sky.

She points up the stairs. 'The restaurant at the top, man.'

We split the chips, but I warn her I'm finished with uphill.

'Jus, you're a lazy ou rol.'

We flatten the wine, then Annie takes me down a red path, shiny from people's feet. But there's no sign of people, just old trees spiking the sky.

At first I think they're skinny new trees. Annie whispers, 'I'm gonna go down. When I say, you must chase them to me.'

Only then I check they're animals with antlers. They stand in a bunch just like the ones in the basement of the Cape Town museum. Stacked to save space. Don't ask how I ended up there, that's another whole story. But true's God, a whole bunch of live buck right here, nose to bum. I grab for Annie, but she's gone. She glides down a line of deep green, a ditch where the rainwater runs. The buck shift, nervous. I wanna laugh, cause they lift up their heads like Disney buck, like they're gonna start singing, I swear.

When she gets way below them, Annie waves at me. The buck jump back in fright, trot on the spot, their black eyes shining. Their fear makes me lekker brave. I charge, flap my hands like a baboon, shout like a flippin man. The beasts shoot up, then forwards, flippin fuel injected. They gallop, the ground hollow under their hooves. They gallop towards Annie, a shit scared stampede, drumming, kicking. Oh my God. But just before they hit her, they split, straight down the middle. Tear down to a faraway fence. They come together again, coast the fence along the highway.

Annie runs back to me, her eyes burning, bulging like the buck. She's laughing, a crazy, crazy kid. 'How was that, hey? How was that?'

It feels like I've just seen something very secret.

Annie says, 'I always used to do it. I always used to tease the buck.'

I dunno why, but this stupid sadness parks on my heart. Even with the Syns. I feel sorry for little Annie, you know, Annie the kid. Coming up here, scaring the buck.

Rich white girls give us a lift in a Renault Megane. They've smoked something, but one's hyped and one's dumb. The hyped one lisps a tongue ring. Doesn't stop talking. 'We're getting out of the bowl, we've so had it with the city. Where are you from? Oh, cool, I know. You're like us, you need to play out of your zone sometimes.' Her words jam up my head, prick holes, tear the membranes. It feels like my brain's all stuffed with junk.

I go home, Annie hooks up with them, takes them to Penzance Pub at the station. She thinks she's one of the girls now she's given up the job.

Next door, the little boy's banging on something. Funeral drums, bang, bang, banging some grief. I stick my head in. There's still bright cloth everywhere, but in tight tangles. The machine needle's still stuck in mid air. Naartjie peels scattered, curling. Madeleine's still slumped on the bed in her purple red dress. There are chips and bruises on the walls, dents in the table. Noel's banging the room with his mother's tin pot. Sheez. I've gotto take a few extra to chill.



Sunday, I'm starving. I'll kill for fish. I'm on my way to the café and little Noel shoots out. Hooks a leather belt round my leg. I wanna chuck him off, but I see it's a man's belt. Must be his dad's. He's got dried white streaks running from his eyes. He drags me into the room.

Her big body's under a yellow striped cloth. No head, no tail. I lift up one side. Her toenails are already too long. Her legs limp, powdery, like the Princess's skin. I lift the cloth off her head. Tufts at her neck. Most of her hair extensions are off. The same white trails out her eyes, down her loose cheeks. I give her a good shake.

She comes awake bit by bit. Takes forever to remember me.

'Tessa.' She gets my name wrong.

I run back to my flat, grab the pack of Panado. They're child's play, nothing. For me, just back up. Twenty six left.

I get water. 'Take four every two hours.' I push four between her lips. 'No.' I read the back of the pack. 'Two every four hours.'

I buy fried hake from Mays café. It's down the hatch by the time I reach the lights. I go give Noel a fat Granny Smith apple. What the hell, I give work a miss. Stuff the Sunday market men. The ones who tell their wives they need some tools, come buy me instead. Mid morning I take a couple of extra Adcodol. I need peace cause I dunno why, I feel sorry for everyone. Sorry for little Annie on the mountain, chasing buck to feel big and strong. Sorry for little Noel, his mountain of a mama caved in.

I stay home but I don't sleep. Not me, not in the day. I take my pills, get nice and chilled. Go next door, talk to Madeleine. I dunno if she's listening, but okay, I'm a bit high. I wanna show her I know what it's like to have a broken heart, so I tell her the whole Athol story.

'I gave my TV to the beach preacher.' Madeleine shifts, but the cloth stays on her face. The word TV makes Noel put the TV on. 'This boyfriend was giving me shit.'

Noel checks me out, sharp. Another word he knows.

'He gave it to *me*. So I gave it to the preacher at the beach.'

Athol was always saying, 'Just watch that preacher. He's got fantastic charisma!' In his fake American accent, must have got stuck to his shoe while he was walking in New York.

'I gave the ou my TV. I told him he should stay home. Watch church on TV.'

There's an ad break on Madeleine's TV, it's Andy MacDowell saying she's not scared of wrinkles.

'Well, he makes such a bloody noise.'

The oke goes on and on about disaster. How God's gonna get us. Strike us down with his fire. Drown us with his floods. Long lists, he gives. And always in there, the prostitutes.

I tell the lump on the bed, 'Athol, this boyfriend of mine, he cocked me a deafy at the Scratch Patch.' Madeleine's foot twitches. The cartoons have got Noel by the eyeballs. 'He hurt my feelings.'

I can say it now cause I feel nothing.

Athol made out like he was so into me. Told me I'm like gold. I've got spirit. I'm so real.

'At first I thought, ag, sure, he's just trying for freebees, but then he took me to see movies. We saw, what's it, Moulin Rouge. At Cavendish. And he bought me a TV.' No one minds when I forget to talk. High as a kite, I sit there, remembering.

Athol wired his camera to the TV. Suddenly my spotty mirror wasn't good enough. He wanted to watch us doing it on the screen. But I didn't mind cause when he was still just a jump, he wanted us to sit next to each other, the blanket up to our belly buttons. Look at us in the mirror. How could I make him pay? I feel nothing now, but that time he hit a soft spot. He said we looked like brother and sister, him with his wispy peroxide. Me with my bleach. But we didn't. I was skinny and he was still lugging puppy fat. He had red roses on his cheeks, like someone come in from the snow. I'm covered with breeding freckles. He said the gap between my teeth was gorgeous. 'They're like rifle sights,' he said. He said he was dead at my feet.

He said let's go visit his mom. She's still at the flat where he grew up, in Berea. 'Come on,' he said, 'let's go to Durbs. We're Durban jollers.' I saw beaches, bikinis, blue bottles. Going to the Golden Egg, taking his mom for a steak. Thinking maybe I'll take him to meet you, Ma. Say nothing about your years in bed, just how sweet you are to look after Graham. Thinking maybe we could go for pancakes at Angie's.

Noel punches the air with his fist. 'Whooaa.' On TV, a robot's head goes flying. I tell Madeleine, 'You know what Athol was in the movies? Okay, he was clever and maybe he's made it by now, but he was a *runner*. A *runner*! That's like a slave, ready to run, ready to fetch, ready to fart if they ask him.' Madeleine's hand creeps out from under the cover. Her nails are crooked and split. 'I went and saw him on set.'

They were filming a scene at the Scratch Patch. Some fighting pirates come across a stash of treasure.

'A pirate movie. Top English actors, he said. Looked E-Grade to me. E for effing dumb.' I'm on a pluck. Flying nicely. 'A runner on a kak movie.'

He was holding sun block for the makeup woman, who was rubbing it into red strips on the pirate's arms. It was way too late. The ou was streaked with black makeup like he'd been rolling in a dying braai, but the sun had cooked the rest of his pommy body. Athol jerked when he saw me. The roses on his cheeks boiled, got bigger, the tips of his ears glowed red. 'Athol!' I waved, all cheery, like I was a cousin or something, come to Cape Town for a tennis tournament.

'He cocked me a deafy. Made out like he'd never met me.'

Bastard gave me these ugly get-lost eyes. I got a helluva shock. Pulled myself together. Gave him back the same face. Then I went and splashed water on it. Took a few Syndol. Okay, this time for pain.

'He was too ashamed to even greet. Too larney, the shithead.'

And he said he liked me cause I was one of a kind. So straight, the way I handle things. 'Gritty,' he called me. 'Gorgeous.' I still went and looked at the rocks on display, brilliant colours like they were dyed. They gave me a poster with all the different stones you can get. Upstairs they had barrels and barrels of

stones, plugged into electricity, rolling, rolling, to get the look of the wind and the rain and the passing centuries. The Sins worked like a bomb.

‘So when I got back home I carried his TV all the way to the beach.’

I go back to my loft, you know, feeling sweet. Fine about everything. Tell the Princess, tell her grey eyes, ‘Fine, I’m fine.’

Little Noel comes in, I dunno when. Finds the fluffy puppy I got for Angie’s new baby, the one I never sent. He ties a string to it, chucks it into the loft. Fishing for someone to play with.

‘Hey.’ I fall back into bliss.

Later, there’s shouting from down there on the road. Shouting in African. The boy’s against the sky, birds flying behind him. He jerks his line up, laughing. The fluffy puppy hits the window. Down again, Noel leans over, tryna see. Someone skids into my room. Her bib’s so bright it’s like a flipping light. The Shoprite car guard. She whips Noel off the balcony wall. Holds him tight like he’s a lucky, lucky prize. She rants at me in her funny French. I flick my hand, cluck my tongue. ‘Stuff off.’

It gets me up, though. Sheez, I’m slipping. Lying around like you, Ma. I better do something before the day dies. I cross the railway line, go see Bonita.

The room stinks of sweet weed. Bonita’s sitting up on the couch, staring at her two plate stove. That evil oke Merrick’s lying there, his head on her lap, his arm over her knees. I swear, sucking the hem of her shirt like a kitten. Josie’s on the arm of the couch, eating polony on bread. The smell of dagga and polony clash badly. Josie opens her sandwich, shows me she’s made a little skirt for her bread with lettuce. Geez, the smell knocks me. ‘Why don’t you open the windows, guys?’

Sharonne’s voice from inside, ‘Because they don’t wanna get caught for dope.’ I go into the bedroom. Oh, God, she’s also eating polony. Sitting cross legged on a mat, leaning against her

tightly made bed. A plain sandwich cut up in perfect squares. She uses a plastic straw to pick them up.

'Just dope?'

She shrugs, nods. She licks a finger, picks a crumb off her dress.

'Bonita.'

Bonita smiles at me, reaches out to stroke me.

'Did you hear Annie got chunked out of a car?'

A long wait.

'Annie.' She's found the one.

'Ja, Annie. She got badly roasted.'

Merrick keeps sucking on Bonita's shirt. Josie's sucking on her crusts. My stomach's freaked out by all this sucking. I pat my thighs, my arms. 'Here. And here.'

It must be ultra leaded dope cause after a long, long blank, she smiles, 'Shame.' Tries to stroke me again. Flip.

'See you girls.'

I'm gone.

Useless. Bonita's lost.

Madeleine's broken.

That's what men do. Ag, I know it's nice when someone notices you. You've got this boyfriend and he actually listens when you talk. He knows your sister's name and he knows to bring you Coke. I know what it's like to have someone sleep against you, a dead hand on your hip, warm breath on your neck. But they don't love you. They just wanna see what they can get. Keep you like a pet, till they lose respect.



Sheez. Monday morning's a battle. Even my bath water runs too wild. I line my stomach with milk, take my morning five. A shocking thirst hits me, like I'm full of salt. I down water from the bath tap. It's the pills. It's not like I don't know. They make me feel like I've been in the sea for hours. But I haven't swum since I was a kid.

I let the bath water soak through my skin. Scrub off the top layer with the loofah I got at the P.E. Holiday Inn, that masters league hockey trip. I remember us girls called the okes 'lazy aged steaks,' cause that was what was on the hotel menu.

The noise of the steam iron is mean. Tssh. Tsssh. Get to work. I iron my g-string. Choose khaki clothes cause I can't face colour. Hollywood Skinner on the radio tips me into my day. The presenter tells us in her golden syrup voice that Pamela Anderson's going on a Harley Davidson ride to raise bucks for Hepatitis C. She caught it from her ex, Tommy Lee, that time they shared a needle. Bastard didn't tell her. And Jemima Kahn says she's totally cool about that prostitute's blow job, cause Hugh's been in therapy ever since. He's come a long way. Geez, what's the big deal? I'd give him one to remember.

He could sneak me in there. Say I've come to do the ironing. He'll think I'm only good for one thing till we have this chat about how the Catholic church and McDonalds owns more land than anyone. I won't tell him I heard it from a Greenpeace jump. He'll be impressed by my knowledge. He'll be touched by a perfect triangle of burnt skin on my arm, from the iron. He won't be able to get me out of his head. He'll organise lessons from an acting coach for a British accent. He'll promote me to Public Relations. He'll adore me, but he won't be able to let the world know, cause his love for me could kill his image. But the poor guy lives in fear of me leaving.

I swear I nearly burn myself for real. Hollywood Skinner's over, they introduce a guest. Dumisani Gumedede. God's truth, the name shocks me. Same as Dumi from Hibberdene. I switch the iron off. Turn the radio up cause Noel's awake, making car engine sounds. But this guy's slick, this Dumisani. His voice paints a white smile. It can't be him, this charging bull, packing in as much info as possible. The radio guy's quiet cause Dumisani talks up a spell like he's personally tryna feed the world. He works for a food aid set up. He talks about stuff like redistribution, says we're all citizens of the globe. He says his organisation's got credit card promises from all over the world,

plus free transport to get food to people with empty bellies. Except he calls them 'impoverished' and 'famine struck'. He says thirteen different countries have already signed up to give free food or big discounts.

The last time I saw *my* Dumi was in the library. Hibberdene, just when they said blacks could also get books. Graham had banned him from the house long ago. I was meant to be looking for stuff about cows in religion, but I was jumping up like a dog at a fence, tryna grab the Fair Lady off the top shelf. I hadn't heard Dumi's laugh for nearly two years, but I knew it straight away. I fell back into a square chair with dark wooden arms. I was so glad to see him I wanted to stick onto him, hug him. But I slapped him instead, on his leg, so prickles stood out on his skin. It's like the air around us took a split second breath. Dumi had muscles in his legs now and his shoulders looked like they'd been stretched sideways and pinned. He was barefoot in the library, the Car mag in his hand.

'I'm looking for cows.'

'Here?'

'You know, when the Zulus cut their throats?' I tried to explain. 'And the people in India think the cows are their grannies and train drivers go to jail for running them over, even if they can't stop in time ...'

He chucked himself into the next door chair. 'Okay, I'll tell you the Zulu part.' Dumi's voice hadn't broken yet and he didn't smell like a man. He was still the boy who had helped me with my knitting, held my beetles for me, danced in the horsebox at the back of the café. He started telling me about lobolo, how men pay for their wives with cows.

'So they swap their daughters for cows?'

'Yes. A man with many cows can take many wives.'

'So for a girl, all they get is this?' I stuck my fingers up like horns, made him laugh so Mrs. Frick, the librarian, brushed past in her flowery dress, all aggro.

'Tess, they get meat, they get milk. It's ... better than money.'

I went all sly, 'And the man? What does he get?' Geez, Dumi got embarrassed. He shut up, looked down at the floor. Me, I

laughed, crazy as usual. A funny picture in my head. 'Ja, that's good! A cow, a cow!'

'What?'

'That's a good swap.' I was laughing, imagining one day I disappear. Graham looks outside and all he sees is a cow in the yard. I laughed so much Mrs. Frick started coming for us. So I stuck the strap of my bag into my mouth, shut myself up. And Dumi told me a whole lot of Zulu stuff. He wrote down the words, Shela uzonquonywa. It means, Be my Zulu wife. He told me how the man's family slaughters an extra cow to welcome the bride home and the girl puts some money in the cow's cut open stomach to say, 'Hi, I'm part of your family now.'

'What else about cows?' I asked. He sat and thought like a wise old man. Told me about how in the old days the men in a new fighting troop used to kill a bull with their bare hands, to ask their ancestors to make them strong.

'Geez.'

Dumi nodded. 'It was cruel. They stuck their fingers in the bull's eyes and they squeezed its ... its ...'

'Balls?'

He nodded, shy. 'But they say it was quick. The old men taught them how.'

I got five out of twenty cause I only did the Zulus, not the other cultures. I cried down at the duck pond, in the school grounds. I didn't want the kids to call me Waterworks, cause I cried for nothing in those days. But Angie saw me and told my teacher, Mr. Naidoo, the first Indian teacher ever in our school. He came to speak to me nicely. I told him I got all the info from a *real* Zulu and he changed the mark to fifteen.

I burn my eyes brand new with Safyr Bleu. Brush my teeth, suck some Triple X mints. I can't remember why Graham banned Dumi. All I remember is Gladys's face. It was stiff, stiff, like an African carving. When I got home from school, Dumi wasn't there, waiting on the stairs. Gladys was at the table, polishing

the buttons on Graham's uniform. I dropped my bag, went looking for him. 'Dumi? Du-mi!'

Gladys waited till I came back and asked, 'Where's Dumi?'

She didn't look at me. Her lips were stiff, stiff. 'Dumi is not coming again.'

I stared into her face, varnished bloody stiff. 'Why?'

She stared into the little buttons, kept polishing. I started wailing, 'Why-yy ...?'

'Boss Graham said he is too big to play with you now.'

'No-o. Why?' I was crying like a baby by then.

'Boss Graham doesn't want him here. Boss Graham says it's not right.'

Maybe cause I put him in my family lists. I wrote them over and over on bits of paper. Merle Peterson, Graham Peterson, Tess Peterson, Angie Peterson, Gladys Peterson, Dumi Peterson, Lady Peterson (always the dog). Maybe Graham thought I meant Dumi Peterson by marriage, but it was really just Peterson by friendship. A kak feeling of wanting to cry laps at my throat, so I take a couple from my lunchtime bunch. I'm hungry as hell today. Maybe cause I remember Dumi's mother's spinach. She made it taste like saucy meat. We ate with our hands, steaming chunks of putu, with our fingers all hooked.

When Gladys got fired, Graham had banned Dumi long ago already. But Gladys was still working for us. She'd been telling me about the army guns. The army gave guns to the Africans. On TV they said it was blacks against blacks. Men were sneaking into sleeping huts and ripping up families with bullets. Babies and all. Gladys told me all this stuff. I clucked like her, 'Cha, cha, cha.' But I didn't really get it.

Then Angie went and found a track behind our house. And a whole lot of empty food bowls. She told Graham what she found and that was the end.

'That kaffir bitch is creaming me!' he screamed. He said Gladys was stealing food and selling it to make extra bucks. Gladys did all the shopping, you see, cause it was too much for you, Ma. But Graham had noticed that the food money didn't go so far

suddenly and we kept running out of chicken drumsticks and marge and marmite.

The day Gladys left she told me she paid for the samp and beans and the mielie meal out of her own money. All those bags I helped her lug home from the Cash and Carry, she bought with her own bucks. The rest she got from our fridge. She'd been feeding men, she said, who were hiding from the army guns. She didn't say the ANC, but I knew it was them cause whenever they talked about Winnie Mandela on the radio, Gladys turned it up loud and sang under her breath for hours afterwards.

Gladys helped you get up, Ma. When you started selling Sensual Secrets Leisure Wear. Gladys waited next to your bed when you took your stale tracksuit pants off under the blankets. Gladys smiled at me, a magician, ready to rush the whole pile into the top loader. You smelt mouldy, Mom, from getting old in bed. Like you came with instructions, Lay flat out of direct sunlight. Or maybe it was just the smell of the tea, even though you only drank half of each cup. You got out of bed for nearly a year. But when Gladys left, you sank back down under your blankets. You said your cancer was 'flaring'. Flaring like those red hibiscus down at the duck pond where I went to cry for Gladys, so the kids wouldn't see me.



At the road, Aisha and Keith are fighting. Aisha takes off a high heel, chucks it across the road. Keith comes out of a Port Jackson bush, picks the shoe up. Holds it against his cheek, strokes it. She's pissed off, stands all skew. I walk over there, ask Natasha to check out the cars I get into. Just the colour and make. It's not like I'm asking her to get the number plate. Natasha says, 'You should get you a pimp.' She points into the bush, her pimp's in there with Keith. But his appetite's killing her, it looks like. She's horribly thin. Too much mandrax, not enough food. 'No way,' I say.

I buy bananas and rolls from the garage shop. Don't wanna get like Natasha, those hollow thighs. I'm in denim shorts, denim top. A red mark on the collar. It's a Calvin Klein shirt from the second hand shop. The stain bugs me, but it's more beetroot than blood. And it's just a drop.

Swiss Family man Robinson picks me up. Another bright white from the Northern Hemisphere. A virgin, I swear, when it comes to the sun. They're all over the place this time of year. They say they're buying up the town with their fat francs. I've been with this Swiss oke twice before. Excellent English. Tiny weenie but a ghetto blaster brain. A publisher. Our last session I asked him what he did. He smiled like a nice uncle bringing Swiss roll for tea, 'I read.' That's all he said, like if he told me, I wouldn't understand.

'You ready for some real life?' I say this while I'm rolling down his condom. He's stretched out on the back seat of his Volvo S60. He sucks in some air, not from my question but from the pull I give his penis to get it to fit. He smiles and in his smile, no jokes, I see two daughters and a wife. There in his glasses. Too many pills can turn you into a fortune teller, I swear. I hook a foot up on the arm rest. He holds my hips like the sides of a book. It doesn't take long, but all the time, I'm drifting. I imagine him reading and as he reads the sentences come off the page, wind into his head. Inky words coiling into his brain. Some snuffling, snorting, thrusting going on, then his eyes bulge sunny side up, tuck into his lids, and he comes.

On the way back I let time warp, nice and peaceful. Swiss Family Robinson puts on opera music. He says it's Carmen. Tells me the opera was a flop in the beginning cause of Carmen's low morals. But she charmed everyone. I try listen, but I day dream instead.

He could divorce his wife. Leave her here in South Africa. She'd be happy to stay and arrange pretty salad on the plate with her cool, salad fingers. He could see his daughters in the holidays. In Switzerland I'd teach English just for fun in some brilliant green village. Mom would

send me my books. She'd wipe them off with a wet cloth before she sent them, wipe off the smell of the Natal lizards. I'll put some crinkly Swiss notes in her account to pay for the postage. She'll use the extra money to buy fish fingers, put them in the deep freeze for when she doesn't catch. Or buy extra tackle.

He's quiet now. The car has stopped. I must get out.

Ag, my only books were old school books.

There's a business card in the hollow under his handbrake. I take it.

He looks shit scared. 'No, no. Please don't.'

But I hang onto it. 'You never know. I was very good at writing essays.'

He wants it back.

'I'm not just a place to park your bicycle, you know.'

He wants it back, but now he can't ask.

The loft is calling, the Princess wants me home. But I've gotto stay up, stay in the sun. Watch the cars, swing to one hip, turn out a foot. Swing to the other, click my fingers. Come and groove boys, let's party in the day. Shake my hair to get some attention. The sun chews the sea side of my face. Some rubbish truck guys hit their palms on their fists. Bastards. I bend an elbow, clamp my arm, that almighty zap sign. Stretch up, swing round the lamp post. Bored girl looking for action.

Aisha and her Keith go off for lunch. Natasha's dad arrives on a bicycle and sits with her pimp in the bush. He looks just like her, her dad, cheeks sucked against his teeth. His eyes too bright. They're drinking out of paper cups, watching Natasha for their next white pipe. Natasha hangs her head, her lower lids loose, looks like she's tryna catch coins. Her thighs breakable, they're so thin. Two men living off her bod. Geez, get some houding, girl. Get some self respect.

I'm thirsty all day. Thirsty, thirsty. Get some Coke. The mechanic at the garage asks, 'Where's Annie?' When I tell him Annie's

given up, his lights come on. He thinks he's in with a chance, now that Annie's turned into someone new. Ha.

I drink it there, fill the bottle with water. Let my g-string stick way out my pants. Maybe pick up petrol station trade. There's a red Hyundai having its tyre pressure done. He pulls off. Comes past again. Third time he stops, but damn Musica flies past hooting, a boy in his passenger seat. It scares Hyundai away, but I get him on his fourth pass. The power of a g-string, a sign of split flesh.

A little Indian man. So keen he lies me in a bed of snails. A whole flippin convoy there in the Australian Port Jacksons. He hurts my shoulders, thin as he is. His knuckles sink into my arm joints.

'Take it slowly,' I say, cause I know that speeds them up, brings on a surge.

That night I have the dream. Maybe it's thirst that makes me dream of water.

A big wind blows up. It's home, but the colours are different. At home the dam is the colour of mud, but in the dream it's shiny lead. The sun is yellow, like a Cape Town sun. It bounces off the Hustler pages. They're torn out, spread out in the sun. Sahara, Fatima, Melissa. I know their names. Sahara on her knees, sucking in her stomach. Fatima's on her side, her breasts look shy at the ground. One knee up, her hips unhinged for the camera, she flashes pink skin. Melissa bends down from her waist, her hamstrings stretched in lines like spines. Her head's swung round so her fanny and her face are in focus. Her eyes are frightened.

A big wind blows up, unusual for Natal. I dive to pin them down, but my hands are small on the glossy sheets. Graham's in his wheelchair on the edge of the dam. His belly rests on his slack legs. His gold sign of Gemini glitters in his chest hair. He's stuck in the mud. The wind blows up, 'Get them,' he shouts. Sadness cracks his voice, 'Get them, Tess.' The photos shiver and whip and lift up in the sky. Graham chucks his arms up, begs, 'Run, get my girls.'

I watch my small hands, snatching, clutching, just missing Fatima. She buckles in the wind, a crippled kite. She falls to the water and floats with the others, lost girls in lead water. I am naked and small, but I churn through the mud. I run in the water. It's ice cold and the mud thrashes thick with sand sharks. Under each foot, a slippery fit. I grab for the pages, but they suck under. It's my fault, I've gone and woken the sand sharks. They flick and jerk, whip the water, bury the girls. Down there, I know I can never get to them. I'll never save them. Graham's head is in his hands, his elbows big on the arms of his chair. He heaves, cries like he's retarded. The sand sharks jab at me as I stand there, cut my legs. I keep my scream in. I wee in the water, shit scared. Useless.

Noel breaks in from the balcony side. Shakes me awake. He grabs me, pulls me towards the bathroom, tryna show me something. He crawls under the bathroom door. I'm not in the mood to play.

I try go back, but he shouts from the other side, 'Mama!'

He unlocks the bathroom door. Lies on his stomach, stares through the crack under the shower door. Shouts something about his mama.

The water's rushing inside. I tell Noel to mind out the way. Lie on my stomach. Steam boils on the floor. Water tunnels along a soggy wall. The water is pink. Oh, God. I see in my mind, Madeleine peeled like a plum. A razor. Oh my God, probably an artery. I see her crumpled in the shower, gushing red.

I run up the stairs, shove on Henrique's door. Fall into loud TV. Henrique can't hear me. I wave my arms, run to switch it off. Change my mind, grab him like Noel grabbed me. In the passage I shout, 'Madeleine's locked in the shower! She's cut! She's cut!'

I lie flat, point under the door.

He hurtles past my head. The sound of an elephant hitting a tree as he rams the door with his shoulder. No use. He punches the shower door, shouts. Doesn't wait for an answer. This time he kicks.

Madeleine blinks in the shower, pink fingertips held up in fright. Her braids all gone. Her red dress stretched at her chest, half her nipples peeping. Streaming red at her ankles. Running red dye into the gutter.

Madeleine hoofs Henrique, a hard one so he drops. She screams, snarls, slaps and slaps.

When she stops, I turn off the taps.

She wasn't bleeding. She was just grieving.

Geez.



A week after that I meet Lennie.

It's late. I'm on my way home from the road. I walk along the pavilion bridge cause it's still hot, hot and it helps to see the sea. Down on the beach, dark brown mamas wash up like whales. In huge D-cups, I'm talking humongous. Tent panties, totally see-through. They let the sea take them, drag their hands in the sand. Laugh their heads off. Carry on like it's Christmas.

That dream keeps bugging me. I used to swim for hours as a kid, till one day I saw dark shapes. Shit, suddenly I saw that the sea's full of cruising, diving, whipping shadows. It's swirling and murky like an ugly, scared night. I thought, forget. I'm not going back in. Not past my knees.

It was nothing like Ange, who stopped swimming cause she got fat. When I left home she must've eaten for me, cause she got podge, refused to swim. Wore hot clothes, long skirts and sleeves.

'Chubby bums,' I called her when I came home one time. Eesh, she got cross. Attacked me with her nails, scratched my shins.

'Graham! Get your daughter off me!' I shouted.

You know Angie's temper always drops as fast as it comes. She said sorry, begged me to stay one more day.

'I can't man Ange, I've gotto get back to work.'

Fifteen, I was. My work was to be beautiful for my boyfriend. It was Dave the DJ then, I think.

There's a clock on the ticket shed. Five to five. There are two girls left on the supertube. String bikinis. One runs head first up the stairs. The other one takes dainty steps, holds the hand rail. It's Josie and Sharonne, Bonita's girls. The other sunburnt riders trot out the gate, wrapped up in towels. But Bonita's girls stay, milking the tube.

The rubber band guy's in his kiosk. A skinny ponytail, stick legs folded, feet locked on his knees. Staring at the air above the pool's twisting water. The skinny Buddha, as usual, slacking on the job. Some Vrygrond kids hook on the fence, watch the girls. One unlatches from the wire mesh, flicks his buddy with a towel. Whips a sore stripe on his leg. A towel war breaks out. A little one cries. Then the big ones make like they're running away, leave the small ones, laugh at their panicked shrieks. Like a loose troop of neighbourhood dogs, they roam their way home.

I go down the stairs, watch the girls land in the pool. They take the last bend, legs out straight. Josie flips onto her stomach, flicks onto her knees, arms in the air. Mouth wide open, taking in gallons. She bombs into the bubbling pool, disappears. Sharonne sits tight, hands flat on the fiberglass. Mouth clamped shut, chin up. She slips in, light as a leaf, stretching her neck to keep her head out. She walks to the edge, her hair still dry.

'Where'd you get the money?' I pluck at my wrist. Josie points at the rubber band guy, water sticking to her like varnish.

'He's Mom's friend.'

'Oh.' I nod.

Friends in high places. A perk of the job.

'How much?'

His head's on his hands against the fence. His pretty nose through a hole. He asks the faithful old question but I swear I think he means the supertubes.

'Twenty rand for the day.'

His head snaps my way. 'A day?'

Slowly my brain grinds back into action. 'No.'

He laughs softly at my mistake. His front teeth are missing, the fashion here on the flats. A glimpse of gums and two sharp canines. His other teeth are small, white. He's got a history book kind of head. Something about the way his head dips at his temples, super fine. Cheek bones hang his face nicely. I cut the crap. 'How much've you got?'

His skin's so thin you can see the veins just under it. Small muscles tighten at the edge of his eyes. His nostrils pull tight, then stretch. His jaw muscles play like strings. Ag, as a man, pretty sweet. But not much of a man.

Plus he's got a popout belly button. I see when he lifts his money out of his pants. Counts it, all discreet.

'Eighty seven rand.'

That's halfway between a blow and a screw. I check him out. His eyes seem black, but they're the darkest blue, the sky when the sun's on the other side of the earth. Faraway eyes, not the stabbing eyes I get from men, eyes that sosatie my body parts.

That's how things started with Lennie. Me confused at the supertubes, and his popout belly button.

His baggy pants scuff the ground. His white shirt a bit brown in the creases. I get in, chin up for Bonita's girls and the last of the people playing putt-putt. A dark blue Mini, painted with PVA. A skinny gear stick. It's like a toy car, low on the ground. Clean inside. He taps his thumbs on a thin steering wheel. His breath runs out with a catch. He smells of soap, plus a touch of curry. 'The police stables okay?' he asks at the fruit seller's lights.

'You a cop?'

'No, no. I'm not.'

A pyramid of oranges. Some cut open melons. R9,99.

'What's your name?'

'Lennie.'

I don't think he's dangerous. But what if that walking under water look switches to greedy? Greedy to see the whites of my eyes. See my skin nicely sliced.

He takes the turn off to Capricorn Park. One side's all cleared for building that hasn't happened. Just ducks walking the new tar roads. On the other side is pure bush. Past that, the police stables.

He pulls up outside two long white buildings. No one around. The stamp of hooves on cement, some huge heads turned to us. Black eyes, jaws stop chewing. One snatches at no man's space, ears flat, its teeth flippin flesh cutters. Neighs louder than a police siren.

'I'm shit scared of horses, hey.' In case he fancies a screw among the hooves of a restless thoroughbred.

He pulls a foam mattress from the back of the car. He's got a reserved suite this end. Clean straw, hardly a whiff of horse shit. A hole in the wall, covered with mesh. Air conditioned accommodation. Some chopped wood in the corner, half covered with canvas. A cement trough in the shadow.

'What do you like? Just here, lying down?' I go onto my knees, push him gently onto the mattress. Pat his pockets, not obvious, check for weapons. Something solid, what is it? Maybe a closed knife? I stroke it. It's not smooth, not metal. He's not talking at all. Breathing like I'm about to do open heart on him. I take it as excitement. Fine, I'll be home with fish and chips, maybe some Tassies before six.

Sheez am I wrong. I only realise when I fish his dinges out of his zip. No amount of sucking or teasing can get it to work. All it can do is twitch. And flop. Twitch. Flop. Like a newborn thing, it can't stand on its own.

Eventually I catch it half hard, dress it in rubber. I slip it inside me, my shirt buttons undone, my bra propped under my breasts to try send blood to his thing. He holds my boobs, squeezes them. Just a twitch.

What a woes.

'What do you like?' I ask him.

'I don't mind.'

Easy going oke. Easy going flop. I pull up his shirt, tickle his nipples with my tongue. Bony chest. A few stray hairs. Not

much of a man. I try pinning his hands behind his head. Move. I sweat, work like a pig to get momentum. It's like dancing with a flippin jellyfish. He shunts his breath out, goes from caramel to instant pudding purple, he's trying so hard.

Another, 'What do you like?' and his thing flops out. He stares at my vagina like it's a spider. I slap his penis, try revive it. Soft smacks with my open hand. That's when he laughs. A gurgle, unexpected from such a serious oke. I kill my own giggle, 'I'm still keeping the money.'

My record so far is about ninety percent in under twelve minutes. Often I make them put their hands behind their heads and they can't take the suspense. A cheap round, usually. But not with this oke.

I pop a mint. Pull out a wet wipe. Usually I don't clean up right in front of the jump, but this guy's not counted. I keep an eye on him for violence.

'Can't say I didn't try.' Wipe the skin between my fingers.

His pants are back on, his laugh is gone. 'It's not your problem.'

He leans against the stable door, looks out. I wanna get into the wind, check if the Muizenberg mountain's gone dark. But I'm trapped in here with a flippin sad man.

'It's ...' He watches me clean under my nails. '... since they found out I couldn't make babies.' God, his eyes go a bit glassy.

'Shame.' I mean it, but I'll mean it more if he gets out the way and lets me out.

He fiddles the straw with his foot. Sounds shrunken, 'I can't even do it with my wife.'

A relief to hear. Makes me say all the nice things I can think of.

'Don't stress. At least you're trying, man.'

I scoot to the car. Limp Lennie hangs back, goes to see one of those long necked jaws. It's in the stable right at the end, two empty stables inbetween. Pulls that thing out his pocket. Feeds it to the horse. It's a bloody carrot. The horse swings its head up and down, demolishes it. When it's finished it shoves at him with its head. He turns his back and the beast rubs its whole long face against him. Hard, so he topples. He staggers, stays

up. It cheers him up, cause his face breaks into light, like the sweep of a lighthouse. It catches me before it vanishes.

On the way back I talk to wipe out the whole limp business.

‘Is that your horse?’

‘No, it’s a police horse. But ... they don’t use it anymore.’

‘Do you ride?’

‘My father was a horse trainer.’

The silence makes me lousy for my Syns.

‘We used to play horses when we were kids. Imaginary, you know? Me and the girl from over the road.’

Fat Sanette. The pile of gravel on her driveway was our mountain. I copied her, my hands out in front, cantering. Dumi went on foot. His imaginary falcon swooped above him. When he held his arm out, it gripped onto his wrist.

‘But real horses, uh-uh. I had a bad experience.’

‘Did you fall off?’

‘No. This girl near us, Kerry, she had a white horse.’ I don’t know why the shit I’m telling him this. ‘One day I went to the beach, she was picking these big ticks off the horse’s bum.’

He laughs. But it’s not funny. So he shuts up and waits.

I came up from the sea in my bikini. There she was on the grass, with her white cart horse. Picking them off with her bare fingernails. Dropping them into a matchbox.

‘What you gonna do with them?’

‘Burn them.’

The ticks were big as butter beans, easily. A tight, plucking noise as they came off. Freaky. I hung round, watched with some of the tanning girls, all baby oiled. Some surfer boys. The horse arched its tail and blew a stinky wind. We all fell round moaning, holding our noses. I felt like I was part of the gang.

By accident Kerry knocked the match box with her foot. The pile of ripe ticks scattered on the grass. I ran, screaming. Not thinking they’re useless with their fat blood bodies and their stupid short legs. Forgetting that ticks can’t sprint.

A mistake.

The boys flicked them back in with a stick. 'It's alright. You can come back.' I waited there on the hill, laughing. Tryna make out that I screamed on purpose. I had to go back.

As I got close they charged me. Pulled at my bikini. I jumped away, screaming. One boy held me. The other one emptied the box in my pants. Cold, thin skins, waving legs. They were gonna go inside me, into my fanny, blood sucking blood bags going in.

But all I say to Lennie is, 'Some kids stuffed a whole lot of ticks in my pants.'

He nods like he's sorry. Like it happens sometimes.

I sat down to stop them going in, to stop the tickling, the march of black blood. I screamed so loud, people ran up from the beach to see. Holiday makers, Transvaalers tryna get me up, get me onto my feet. I bumped along on my bum, screaming louder as I felt them explode. I wet my pants. Kerry got onto her horse and trotted out of there, low on the horse's neck. The boys hid up a tree, in case the police came. No police came, but an Afrikaans auntie in a full costume, those ones with a tutu, saw the blood on my bikini bottom. She said, 'Toe maar, toe maar. All girls get it.' I fought like hell when she tried to touch me. When her husband tried to take over, I let go an ugly, ripping screech and scratched him. He quickly sat down on the bench. The tannie coaxed me slowly to the showers, lead me like a crazy horse. Shouted orders to her hubby. Told him to stand with his back to us. Hold up a towel. She turned the shower on full blast. She nearly died when she saw the shells of the ticks washing out my pants. Away with the water into a heap of brown leaves.

They took me home in their car. You said, 'Shame,' Ma, in a voice that wasn't sorry. You smiled a half smile that wasn't kind. You said, 'You'd better not tell Graham. You know how berserk he is about ticks.'

But Gladys was pissed off, big time. She gave me some of Graham's Coke and swore about those boys, called them fucks in Zulu.

I pile in the Syndols, that time after Lennie. I dunno what's happening, but everywhere I go, my past keeps breaking on my head like a foamy. It's like I've sprung a little leak and I can't seem to fix it. Not even with pills.



End of Feb, me and Annie go to the races.

The day of the Met, I wake up with a woozy gut. My nipples feel rubbed, a bit raw. How did that happen? I have toast and marmite, take my pills. Blowdry my hair. Put on foundation for a change. I can't face perfume. I check out the noise outside my door. Henrique and some oke are battling to get a contraption into Madeleine's flat. Looks like a lifeguard's tower. Noel skips around like a fox terrier, yapping. Madeleine's in a yellow skirt, a brilliant blue crossover top. Her hair's combed straight up, makes her double the height. She's got packets of white powder clamped under her arms.

'What's happening?'

'I am going to make bompies.'

She holds up a packet. It's got a sticker that says sodium benzoate. The other one drops on the floor. Noel picks it up, sticks it back under his mother's arm. 'I only need the syrup.'

Bompies are frozen suckers. Sugar water, iced.

Geez, some people flog their bodies for bucks, some sell flippin frozen water. Fine, I think, but what will she eat?

I stick my smart shoes and my dress in a bag. Hit the road in shorts. On my way out I see they're hauling her contraption up from the road with a rope.

Annie and me scored a special invite. The horse race of the year, free food and drinks. It's a flippin pity that Annie's given up, cause we could coin it if we were clever. Still we're gonna party.

Watch us.

I catch a taxi to Vrygrond. Walk up the new tar, past some kids burning polystyrene in the bush. They run into the black smoke, run away. A crowd of Vrygrond mongrels run with them, rumbling and swerving with high happy tails. There's a white pony grazing on the side with an icecream tub stuck on its foot. But it's the back foot, too dangerous. As I walk past it shies sideways, crashes into the Port Jackson. I don't blame it. I've seen the kids, how they chase the horses. A little brown foal, slim as paper, takes off after it.

Some kids speed down the new white line on the chassis of a shopping trolley. Two big kids jump off, drag it to a stop. One of the tiniest tips onto the tar. They all ask me for food-clothes-money-for-electricity in a never ending sentence. Watch my backpack like they're waiting for a flippin eclipse of the sun to grab it and run.

'Uh-uh. I've got nothing.'

But they still crave my backpack. I say, 'I've got nothing for *you*,' and they stop following.

The old Annie's back. Already raving when I get there. She's in her dad's lounge, chucking one of his beers down her throat. I dunno what he puts in it, washing powder, maybe. A bit of Omo, I think, cause you shoot to the top, float there. But the hangover comes early. If you don't get something else quick, you're dirty water, down the drain.

Annie's playing loud reggae, drowning out the stale jokes from the yard. A bunch of men slouched against the fence, drinking Annie's dad's Omo.

Annie's in black stockings and white gloves, no jokes.

'Blackmail,' she says, rubbing at the stockings. Her lips done in purple. Her eyes sparkling.

'Huh?'

'They're called Blackmail.' Annie talks with her teeth cause her lipstick's so thick.

'Where from?'

'Pick n Pay.'

Annie presses on her suspender clips, but she's not patient enough. I crouch down next to the sofa. The yellow cloth on the couch has still got curtain rings on it. I click her suspender clips shut, one by one. She chucks back more beer.

'Keep still man!'

Annie twirls her free leg. Her balance is amazing, showing off to the mildew mirror. There's still fur on the walls from last winter. I click Annie's last clasp. 'I dare you to go just like that.'

She laughs.

'You'll be like a fashion model. They go nearly naked. Or in just newspaper.'

'Newspaper?'

'You know, those recycling designers.'

Annie's dad comes in, his dreads big as a bunch of bananas under his Bob Marley beanie. He ignores Annie as she bends over, wobbles her tits, settles them into her black bra. Annie's breasts are new and strong, coffee brown. Silky, like they've never ever been punched and pummeled like putty. She manages her own hook and eye.

'What you wearing?' Annie's dad asks me. I pull out my white lycra dress. Straight out of my backpack it looks like a rag.

'You should see it on,' says Annie.

Annie's dad disappears. The good thing about him is he's not interested in us. He's got his own girlfriend, younger than me.

It's easy for him to pull chicks. He's a powerful oke. He's got a busy shabeen. Sells food, too. He makes a killing, cause he gives credit. So he says, I'll give you this beer, this fatty chicken, this bank bag of dagga, if you pay me back double. He keeps people's pension cards, their IDs as guarantee. Acts like he's giving them double the chances, double the luck. I dunno if he's proud of Annie or just mean. When the people say, 'Do something about your daughter,' he tells them, 'Vok off. She doesn't touch the white stuff. She stays out the gangs.' Annie's dad's dead against madrax or tik, says if she touches it, she must maar bugger off and never come back. I suppose he saw Annie's mother going

down. But he's filthy mean with his bucks. He makes her pay rent. Won't give her a cent.

My dress is non crush or whatever you call it. It's so tight anyway, my body disappears the creases. I left it in Jik for a day and a half, so it's thin, but white as Annie's teeth. Damn, it's a bit low, shows some little blue bruises on my breasts. That Indian oke had bony fingers.

But Annie gives me a silky white scarf. She whips it up, rests it on my shoulders. 'There.' She chucks one end round my neck. She climbs into her red boob tube dress, gathered up on one side. Her shoes are sharp picks, flippin pop the earth as she goes. I put on my low snake heels. A wooden S. They've got no back straps, but the crooked bones in my toes stop them from falling off.

Outside, the drinking men straighten up. Watch us over the fence. Get their slack beer lips firm enough to whistle. The smell of stew hits me, cramps my stomach with hunger. Annie's cat sees us to the end of the road, makes funny yipping sounds, purring inbetween. Thinks she's part of our parade. She's ginger, her bony back like a bow, her hair in clumps like she's busy turning into something else. The tips of her ears are bleeding. Her one eye looks straight at the other. Down the road she fades into some wavy air coming off a hot metal shed. The smell of heavy, hot meat makes me crazy.

Kids carry rice and meat in plastic tubs, just like the one on the pony's foot. 'What's happening?'

'It's that Catholic thing. When they come feed us meat, then they starve themself.'

Some horrible hunger kicks me. Annie says, 'That Lent thing, man.'

It's weird cause you never see food in Vrygrond. Not on the streets. Vrygrond seems to live on beer and dust. Pots of water on a thin flame, someone chucks in rubber carrots, a dead cabbage. Ag, okay, I'm exaggerating a bit. Inside the houses you see fried snoek sometimes, and lots of cold porridge. Still,

Annie told me once that lots of the Vrygrond babies, when they cry for milk at night, they get watery tea. My heart gets sore at the thought.

A little girl goes past in a daze, wishing the lid open with her eyes.

She gives up, drops to the pavement. My mouth fills with spit as she digs in the tub. She shoves meat in her cheeks, her eyes gone to a faraway place where meals grow on trees.

We get whistles all the way down the tar. From cars with kak suspensions and tinted windows. Cars held together with rope and hope. It's men running Saturday morning favours, fetching a gearbox, a drug score, bringing a carpet for their mother maybe. Annie cocks a deafy, bubbling on Omo, 'Auntie Elizabeth delivered her daughter's baby in the back of my dad's bakkie last night. You know Auntie Elizabeth next door?'

'Uh-uh.'

'You *do*, man.'

'Oh ja.'

She's got a wobbly jaw and runny eyes. Wise eyes, like she wants to laugh but only she knows what for. She drinks.

'Ooh aah, baby.' We get the middle finger from a blotchy Datsun. That's what we get for all our trouble. Annie with her Blackmail and me with my flippin early blowdry. 'Take it easy, baby,' from a guy in the back seat. Annie just turns them into ghosts. I push her a bit,

'I suppose Baby's better than Naai and Poes and Hoer.'

Annie acts dumb, like she's got no clue what they call us when we're not dressed for the press. Annie's good at blocking things out. Even when she's working the road, she's thinking of Hollywood. The five star life. Her latest is this old actor, Darryl. She drops his name all over the place, thinks he's her boyfriend. Like now, you'd think the Met is the Oscars. She's on a washing powder high, walking a tar carpet. Taking steps too long for her body. You'd think lava's gonna shoot up from the holes her spikes make.

The sun is flippin desperate, thinks it's gonna die young or something. It stings my cheeks, makes wet patches under my arms. You see what I mean, Annie's on about a movie on TV.

'It was called Down with Love. There's these two chicks, like us, in pink suits and those caterpillar goeters around their neck. They stand at the door like this ...' She arches her back, stretches an arm to the M5. 'And then they gooi, like this ...' Annie struts like on a ramp. 'The music goes, you know? It's Renee Zwe ... Bridget Jones, man. She wrote a book about how love makes us swak. So Ewan McGregor made her fall in love with him, but *he* went and fell in love with *her* by mistake. It was so kwaai, I wish you saw it. It was in the old days, when everyone dressed smart all the time, like us, going to the races.'

'What's happening with Darryl?'

'Dom drol.'

'And now?'

She shakes her head, won't say. Talks instead about the drama last night.

'Auntie Elizabeth came to the door, dronk. But Pa says she got sober like this ...' She clicks her fingers. '... when the baby came out.'

'Whose baby?'

'I told you, Priscilla next door. The baby came out in the bakkie. With the ... what's it?' She pulls a fist from her tummy.

'The cord.'

'The cord stuck around its neck. Auntie Elizabeth was shouting in the back, I can't see a bleddy thing! When they got to the hospital the nurse skelled her out, Man, stupid woman, can't you see the cord is around its neck? Auntie Elizabeth sommer shouted back, No, man. Your vokken skollie kids have shot all the vokken street lights out!'

The old guy next to me in the taxi's dead drunk. His breath makes me wanna be sick. He swings his head like a drugged animal, stares at my cheek. It's like he's battling to keep his eyes in. Raw eggs, tryna slip out, like the baby in the bakkie. I let him stare cause you can check he's tried hard, with his striped shirt, his suit pants. And I know that drunk stare. These guys

are already dead. My face's just a screen to watch some blurry movie of his old life. Annie thinks it's helluva funny. Between the two of them I battle to pop my Syns on the sly.

Outside the race course, Annie pulls our tickets out of one of her ruffles. I say, 'Maybe I should keep my own ticket, in case.' 'Uh-uh.' She breathes fresh bubble gum onto my cheek. 'You're not leaving me.'

We walk like the women in Annie's movie, in time, all cruisy. A helluva lot of couples here, with nice, conditioned hair. A model with a wire skirt, coiled from the waist. What did I say? Nothing on but her undies. Red, blue, yellow flags flicker from the wire line. She's got that sun bed skin and white blonde curls down her back. Glad makeup. You know, permanent tan, permanent blonde, permanently flippin glad?

Near the betting tower, lots of good old gambling men gripping flaps of paper. Nicotine skins, yellow stains in their hair, checking us out. Also, Moslem boys, hair like silk banners, shimmering shirts. Young Hanifs. Stylish from the flippin womb. Pity Annie's off the job.

But I'm the one who rushes us past the tower, tryna find the ABSA Bank tent cause my stomach's doing flip flops for food.

In the tent, our hosts cut us dead.

Burt sees us first. A big stretch of the eye, a burst of silence. His tongue flicks back into action, carries on talking to the jacket in front of him. Bastard.

The women have already split from the men. They're putting their fingers deep in their drinks, chasing their cherries. Already relaxing. I don't see William.

Burt and William gave us the tickets at the end of last winter. Okay they were sloshed on red wine at the time. 'Noble' red wine, they said. From William's underground cellar in Constantia. Noble, I reckon, to wait twelve years before you open the bloody bottle. The cork crumbled, sent William and Burt into ecstasy. 'Aah. Delectable, what?' Neither of them from England but they kept their tongues behind their teeth, oh so

terribly English. Berry black wine in squeaky clean crystal. Bloody heavy in my hand.

They picked us up when we were crossing the circle, late in the day. Burt's Merc C230, went round and round and round. 'I smell rich,' Annie said. Flashed them to say okay.

'You must be very dizzy boys,' was my intro.

They took us up, up, up the Neck to a mansion on the mountain. A flat garden, can you believe it. A tractor mower thing parked under a million year old tree. Hundreds of metres of flower bed. One of those huge swimming pools that must make the world look like a mirror ball from outer space. We went straight to the fire place. The boys clipped their words, hopped about. Scratched at matches, lit some chunky logs. Nervous. But they'd done it before, that's for sure.

The red wine flooded my veins. Plus I took my evening dose in William's toilet, so it didn't take long for my muscles to fall off the bone. I don't remember much of inside, just quiet furniture. Polished, backs against the wall, slim little ankles. I remember the hairy rug, though. It sucked me in. And an armchair so comfy it could turn you into a flippin paraplegic. Annie was clever, she only perched on hers.

Hyperactive, she was, on a glass of rich man's blood. Burt cut to his line. Offered Annie a tour of the house. She laughed, blunt as usual, 'Don't you mean a tour of your body?' Made Burt blush to the roots of his cow's lick. He talked nonstop till they reached the second floor, then he suddenly shut up.

I let myself slide off my chair. Sat for a bit on the fur, then rolled onto my stomach. Geez, that place was comfy. I felt like those babies on TV, after their bath. Just love and luxury. I was lying on my stomach on the carpet of dreams, when William stuck his foot under me. Tried to slide it lower. His face was blotchy red. His hair had sprung up, showing all thin. His nostrils grabbed air and of course there was a tent in his trousers. If he'd stroked my legs, or breathed on the back of my neck, there where the

soft hairs make it sensitive, I might have been glad of the job. But no. He was tryna find my clitoris with his big toe. Missing by a mile too, kind of hakking at my hip bone, mostly.

Shit. Let me get this done.

So I hauled myself up, straddled his little one man tent and let him suck too hard on my breasts with his thick, spoiled lips.

God, the things we do for bucks.

Burt's a doctor. A hand surgeon. He's gripping his cocktail glass so hard his hand's gone white, but his ears are fleshy red lamps. He forgot about us. Probably wrote off the two hundred for Annie long time ago. Forgot he even gave us tickets. Burt turns his back, does some eyebrow signing, probably. William fades when he sees us, wants to disappear.

It's a big mistake to ignore us. Annie says, 'Poes' under her breath. Tilts a juicy cocktail to her lips.

Once I've chucked a few tiny chicken pies in my mouth, my taxi top up starts working properly. I get that good, creamy feeling. We're okay, Annie and me. The guy at the door took our tickets. We've got a good view of the mountain and a couple of men by the balls. Easy peasy.

Annie demo's to me how Burt said hello out the corner of his mouth. Dropped it like for some stray to pick up. She eats pickles like there's no tomorrow, asks round for a racing programme. I pig out on some white cheese under sweet red sauce. I get some champagne. Let the bubbles supertube through my system, land in my brain with a splash. I check out the wives.

Burt's wife, must be, has a long nose, incredibly long legs. Not a pebble of cellulite. In a dress like mine, stretchy, white. But hers is lined and not so tight. Yellow flowers embroidered round the neckline. Her hair streaked orange and blown back like she's been out breaking the sound barrier. Glitter nails, like she dipped them in the milky way.

No one's talking to me cause my dress is so see-through. They just follow the line of my g-string with their eyes. I eat baby

tomatoes, maybe too many. Come across a grey lump of stuff. Ask under my breath, 'What's this?'

'Aubergine.'

A woman in a white shirt, glasses with no rims. I scoop some aubergine in, maybe too much. Face the crowd, suck my fingers. Catch their eyes slipping back in their sockets.

Stuff them.

This is the races. Where the models wear nearly nothing and dumb hats.

On the loudspeaker the commentator goes crazy, like someone's about to drop a bomb. The tent people snap toothpicks, break up, leave the ham to go hard. Rush to the fence.

Me and Annie hang back.

A whole herd of horses race past, make an earthquake. Gorgeous beasts crack up the crust, their muscles rippling. Their tendons streak white in the sun. The jockeys' silk flashes, cracks in the wind, their whipping arms sweep in a blur. The tent people scream, punch the air, pull their mouths ugly. The commentator climaxes, geez. Raves about Sweet Jewel.

A few rush off, go cram their bags, I suppose. The others come back to the tent, scoff their drinks, stretch their cheeks with too many olives. They've got a hungry look now.

I end up back to back with William. After a couple of bubbles, I'm game to tease. William's wife's got swollen knuckles, the middle one huge, like a knuckle duster. Her thumbs hang funny.

'Our Betty dog's deteriorating fast.' Her face says about thirty five, but her back curves out all osteo. She's talking to a woman with gold vine straps climbing up her calves. Next to Gold Vines is a man with a big belly. Maybe gold coins, like a piggy bank.

'She was kicked by a horse,' William's wife explains.

William argues with her, 'No, it's not that. She has a genetic defect. The runts often do develop problems with their bones. Stiffness.' He's insulting his wife, I can tell. Not talking about Betty dog.

‘Well, she got a terribly hard kick from our Arab. I heard the crack. He sent her flying. And when she was younger, she got caught in a snare. Was it for a week?’ William shrugs, bumps me. Turns to see. He goes patchy, spills his drink on his shoe. Lifts his lip like a nervous dog. Turns back to his wife. Suddenly he cares a helluva lot about Betty dog. ‘She must have survived by licking water off the leaves.’

Annie’s stoked, she’s seen the whole thing. She comes closer. The wife says, ‘I called and called. I went everywhere on horseback.’

William puts Gold Vines out of her misery. ‘But then she arrived at our door.’ Gold Vines slumps with relief, overdoes it a bit. Piggy Bank nods out of time.

‘The wire had been cut.’ William glances behind him.

His wife strokes her crooked thumb, sighs. ‘She’s badly scarred.’

Gold Vines chucks off her depression. ‘Well, I’ve got my second Weimeraner now. She arrived from Joburg on Tuesday.’

‘Oh. How old?’

William tries to gap it, bends his wife to get past. But Annie butts in, ‘Watchout.’

William’s wife cranks back up in a hurry.

‘Watchout they don’t steal it. The gangsters on the flats steal those pure breeds. They’re lekker soft. They can use them as bait. Pure breeds and kittens.’

They gasp so hard I swear the tent sides suck in.

‘They breed killers, those people. Pitbulls. Staffies crossed with God weet nie wat nie. Then they tease them, hang the cats on a rope. Or gooi a pedigree in for them to chew up. It’s terrible. Terrible. You must be careful.’

William dives away, clings to Burt in the corner of the tent, probably saying, ‘Well, now we’re in the dwang, what?’

Annie chucks a long drink down her gullet, sways a bit. Marches up to the two huddled men. Hugs Burt round the stomach. He stares at the parting in her hair, spreads his arms like he’s saying to the ref, ‘I was nowhere near the ball.’

'Dankie vi'die kaartjies, Meneer.' After that down-down, Annie's tongue weighs a ton. I quickly go to the snacks near there.

Burt whispers, 'Can you two please leave?'

'Are you mal? We jus got here.'

'We'll pay you to leave.' An offer from William.

'How much?' She says it too loud. Next to me, some plump profit guy suddenly stops complaining about aeroplane pastrami. And William's wife is watching. Burt begs, 'For God's sake, please just leave.'

'No thanks.' Annie picks up a marinated mussel. Lets it dangle. Asks loudly, 'So Burt, whaddoes this remind you of?' Pastrami tries to work out Annie's question. Roars when he gets it.

William's wife blushes for all women.

I try distract Annie, 'What's pastrami again?'

I know Annie, you don't take her head on. And don't ask her to leave.

Annie thinks hard. 'It's a meat or a pastry. I conremember.' She holds two fingers up to the oke who laughed at her joke. 'I worked at Pick n Pay for two weeks,' she slurs. 'I wore a panty thing on my hair. I learn'd allthenames. But I conremember.'

I try again, 'So what horse do you like?' I go down the programme, 'Look. Pastiche. That's nearly like pastrami.'

Annie ignores my stupid talk. She asks the oke, 'You looglike a boss. Are you a boss?'

Turns out he's William's boss, I swear.

I notice a dark guy watching us. A sideways kink in his nose. I check him out. Camouflage green eyes. Graceful, wears his suit like a man doll. He's talking to a pale woman, one of those miracles of Africa. Where does she hang out? Museums. Afternoon shows? Maybe walks her shaved dog deep in the forest. Sheez. She's telling him she lives in Rondebosch, renovating Victorian, or something. She says, 'I'm Jason's wife's sister.' But Camouflage's watching Annie chat up Pastrami. Pastrami bends towards Annie, rocks. Twitches his lips, dimples his chin, battles to keep out of her cleavage. Annie's slurry

chat a weird coincidence when you think of what happened afterwards.

'A fren of mine started doing gym, daai weights and he en'ed up having a moerse heart op.'

I know the story. The 'friend' was a jump.

'They cut him heretohere.' She draws a knife line from her boobs to her fanny. 'His heart was nearly three times bigger than yoursormine.' She rubs her breast. 'Haai, it was a big lump, the blood an' goeters were tangle'up in a knot.'

Pastrami winces, digs his fingertips into his chest.

Annie pumps air weights. 'If he didn' start pumping, he would never have foun'out.'

Pastrami tips forwards some more so his big lips nearly suck onto her forehead.

'He would have vrekked,' she claps loud, 'like that! Onthejob or som'ing.' Annie shoves a cracker into some liver spread. Drops a splodge on her red dress.

The big guy wobbles forward and licks it, I swear.

Ooh, shit.

I try out a few chickpeas. They taste like paper. When I look again, William's hanging on a tent pole, desperate. Burt's hopping from foot to foot, watching Annie lead Pastrami towards the mobile toilets. And Pastrami's really not digging his heels in. Burt and me, we both know that she's not just showing him the way. Annie's cracked, I reckon. Back on the job.

A surgeon knows when a limb must come off. Burt talks to the ticket guy, a young oke in black and bright white, looks like a porter in a larney hotel. Burt sics him on Annie, I see his mouth say the word, 'prostitute.' Then Burt hurries back to William and the two of them bend their knees, drop a notch, blend in.

Annie, Pastrami and the guard hold hands, make a blind line. The guard's between them, keeping them apart like they're mating dogs. Then he spins Annie away, clamps her arms down. Pushes her towards the tower, the way we came in. Annie starts swearing, but I can tell she expected it. She doesn't kick or bite, just the usual, 'Jou ma se poes! Why don' you sen us *both* out,

hey? Sen him too!’ The banker laughs himself silly, like it was all just a joke.

Some bony, brown shoulders jerk near me. Must be Pastrami’s wife. She stumbles a step, scuttles back. She tries to smile, but it just won’t sit.

I keep max eye contact on my way out. The chicks can shove their diets. Their flippin sleeveless tennis. I stare down the saggy lidded men. I send one single smile to the woman who told me about the aubergene dip. Even if it made me feel sick.

We leave like proud soldiers, Annie and me.

And we hook up with an army general.

The dark guy who was watching Annie stays downwind, catches up with us at the betting hall. By now my food’s begging to come up. I’m saying, no way, you stay.

This building’s made of stress, I swear. A flippin monument. A big brick building held up by panic. Paper all over the floor like a truck’s overturned. Camouflage’s eyes hard on us. His smile is gentle grit. I operate fast. Pull a pink one out my sling bag. ‘Pastiche is gonna win.’ Grin at Camouflage. It’s nearly all I’ve got to my name. Annie checks him out, all blurry, her drunken smirk flippin miles from a sexy look.

Camouflage joins us. Me and Annie place a bet, fifty each. I go for Pastiche, whatever it means. Annie goes for Honeysuckle. ‘Honey-suck-me,’ she says.

We find a spot to watch. Next to us, a man with big, looped curls, a bulb nose. A gnome. I bet he’s got turned up toes inside his twotone shoes. His suit looks waterproof. Green polyester. Staring through the grimy glass. He’s got that swollen skin, pores made all big by the brandy glass.

Sounds like they’re auctioning off the horses outside, the way they shout over the microphone. The commentator shouts, ‘FeistyLadyisofftoagoodstart ... GrandBannertwonecksahead ... Honeysuckle’scomingfrombehind ...’

Annie just about wets her pants. 'GO HONEYSUCKLE, GO!' She roars so you can hear the gravel in that little body. 'GO HONEYSUCKLE!'

'FeistyLady's running third,

Maroon Moon making way for Serendipity ... Serendipity's

taken Maroon Moon but Honeysuckle's keeping her lead,

Honeysuckle's breaking away ...' He foams on in his funny language, more about Honeysuckle.

I dig into Annie's shoulder, dead excited now. I think that squeaking might be me. It's all nonsense now.

'Honeysuckle, something or other, Honeysuckle, something or other ... Honeysuckle ...!!'

'HONEYSUCKLE!' Annie's jumping up, I'm pulling her down.

Hugging her. 'Honeysuckle *won!*' Annie hugs Camouflage.

Polyester claws at his head, chucks himself down on the ground,

sobbing or snarling, I can't tell. Scrapes his gnome's nose on

the floor. Everyone looks away. Gives the guy space to have his

nervous breakdown.

Geez, terrible to see the brain snap like that.

But suddenly Annie's shouting, 'It's a fit! It's a fit!'

Camouflage shouts something to Annie. Annie sits on Polyester's

shins. Camouflage operates like a flippin paramedic. Fast, he

is, calm. Grim as he shoves a stack of race cards in Polyester's

mouth, rolls him on his side. But Polyester vomits the race cards

out, plus bits of ham. The sick shoots up my throat, I shove

it back. But then Camouflage wipes the ou's mouth with his

sleeve, goes down on him. Starts blowing in his mouth. Oh,

God.

I run for the toilets. Vomit. Hide there. Hide from Polyester

fitting, swimming in race cards and sick. When I peep again,

a thick crowd's sprouted. They bend over the Polyester like

flippin weeds in the wind. First Aid's arrived with a stretcher.

Someone's brought buckets. Polyester's emptied his bowels

right through his pants.

I stay in the toilets, pray the guy dies.
When my stomach feels okay, I scoff my lunch time lot.

It turns out it was a massive stroke, not a massive tantrum. They carry him off covered up. I hear one of the First Aid guys say into his radio, 'It was a good try ... An ex-general. Israeli.'
I think they mean Polyester, then I click. Camouflage.

Annie stands in line, collects her cash. Even with the pills, my nerves are shot. It feels like someone's been filing my teeth. And the commentator seems to be saying, 'moneymoneymoney' at the scene of the death. Camouflage got his cuffs stinky during the stroke. He takes off his jacket, hooks it on a finger. I watch him walk out. He drops his jacket in a rubbish bin, keeps walking.

Me, I'm glad he died. It's better to die than be towed to the toilet. Sit in a wheelchair, the curtains closed to see the screen. Watch cooks baste meat on TV, cops shooting crooks, while the flies buzz above you. Give me sudden death any day. At least the oke didn't end up like Graham, sucking spaghetti up one side of his mouth. Counting the trains past the house.

Annie asks me, 'Why didn't you help?'

'My stepdad had two strokes.'

Annie's all comforted by her new money. She holds the notes to her heart, 'Let's go home.'

We're picking our way through the cars when a black Porsche slinks up. It's the Israeli behind oneway Ray Bans. In a helluva fancy tank.

He's got a townhouse in Bantry Bay. A turquoise sea, the cruel, cold Atlantic. It's three in the bed and the general said, 'roll over'. That's when I roll all the way out the bed. Tell them, 'I forgot, threesomes make me skaam.' But it's the anal sex I wanna miss.

All we found out is that he likes it from behind, he swims a kay every day at the Sea Point swimming pool, and he's divorced with a daughter.

It must have been his weekend off.

In the photo in her room, his daughter's got bouncy black hair and light, desert sand eyes. I climb into her little bed. Try forget Polyester. One second standing up, next he's a frothy fit. He was lucky enough to die. Graham wasn't so lucky. He stuck around, turned to old fruit. All pulpy inside.

The first stroke was on his afternoon shift, flippin driving the train. Lucky someone hit the brakes. Angie told me on the phone.

She said he was furious that day. Freaked out before he went to work. She said she was there with little Levine, checking on you, Ma. You were on your back as usual, with galloping cancer. Ange was in shock so she kept telling me stuff that confused the picture. She said you'd ordered books through the post for Levine. One was a book of paper dolls. Levine was bratty, she needed a sleep. She kept whining to Graham, 'Grandpa, cut them, cut them. Cut my girls!' Graham said he was busy, he had to get to work. Angie went out to the vegetable truck cause the maid said there was nothing in the house. Levine started crawling up Graham's railway socks, shoving the scissors at him. Saying, 'Cut them. Cut my girls.'

'Ask the kaffir girl, man, I'm gonna be late.'

The maid took the scissors and cut the dolls out. Told Angie from the stoep what to buy. Levine started howling cause she wanted her Grandpa to cut the dolls out, not the maid. Graham lost it, kicked the gate open on his way out. 'Jesus Christ! I'm sick of you useless women!' which made Levine howl even louder.

They were the last proper words they heard him say.

On the phone to Angie the words, 'Oh my daddy, oh my daddy,' cried in my mind. I felt like a baby. My tears were so sore, water squeezed from concrete. I swallowed most of them. Like a good girl, good and clenched inside.

'Can I speak to Mom?'

Angie whispered, like she couldn't believe it herself. 'She's in the kitchen.'

'What's she doing in the kitchen?'

Still like she's dreaming, 'Making fishcakes.'

In the kitchen, for God's sake. Patting fishcakes into a ball.

I spoke to you a few weeks later.

'What's gone, Mom, his left testicle?'

'Tess, sis, man. How can you joke?'

But I've always joked, Ma, especially when it's not funny.

You told me his short term memory's gone. But it sounded to me like the side that died was the side that said 'Useless woman' and 'Get the kaffir to make me lunch.' He always punished you, Mom, talking like that. You were always scared the maid would hear. You needed your maid, you see, cause you needed your bed.

I asked Graham once why he spoke so ugly to you.

'I'm tryna shock her out of bed, Tess. Give her a wake up.'

Well, Mom you woke up after his stroke. It's like you got what he lost. You got up quarter day, half day, then full day, Ange said. But even when he was limping round a bit, you stayed up. You plucked your eyebrows. Pulled out the old rods. Bought new line. Cut rock bait off the rocks.

Angie said you fed Graham fish, whether he liked it or not. I mean, he's a red meat man.

Angie said the second stroke was her fault. She said her labour made her ugly. Two in the morning and she refused point blank to leave Levine with Graham. She made you all pile into the car. Basil with his crutches, you and little Levine. Her baby tryna find the flippin light of day. You all went in the Peugeot to Addington hospital. You left Graham at home alone.

Angie said five minutes before the baby shot through the gap, Graham had a massive attack. She felt so bad cause when she was in labour and they came to pick you up, Ange shouted at Graham, 'I don't trust you! I don't trust you!'

And all he did was offer to babysit.

Ange cried on the phone. Blamed herself for the big one that put him in his chair, made his face weird. I haven't seen it, but you said he looks like a basset. There was something glad in your voice.

'Even his eyelids, Tess. You know if you hang down over a mirror?'

'Ja.'

'Like that.'

I stopped phoning home after the second stroke. God, the whole family drama, it was too much. Angie killing herself with guilt.

And I didn't have to keep lying about my life, 'Oh, I've got a job in a shop.'

I have one of those horrible dreams in the Israeli girl's bed. It must be Polyester, messing with my mind. In the dream, Graham's stuck on the coach of a train.

A metal shaft right through his middle. His chest pumping, shrinking. Sweat collected between his breasts, wetting his curly ginger hairs. Under that, clean metal. The shaft's got straight sides, the corners are curved. His stomach's gone but his hips are still there. The tips of his boots scrape the railway gravel. We've all come to see him.

Graham stares ahead like he's watching TV. There's no blood in sight, but his face's so white it's like he's been halaal bled. He talks out the side of his mouth. 'I can't see my willy.'

'Like Mr. Binneman,' Angie says.

Graham used to joke that Sanette's dad was so fat he couldn't see his thing.

You're all dolled up, Ma, like you're going to a dance. You're in your pale blue penguin blouse with its flapping tails. Lots of white highlighter on your eye bones.

Ange is acting like a baby, but she's about sixteen. She's in a long skirt, no shoes, climbing on everything.

'Keep still Ange, stop shaking the train.' I feel Graham's pain, which is deep and cold. The metal as heavy as a ton of period blood.

Ange jumps on the train's axle, bangs a door open and closed.

'Ange, stop it! You're gonna hurt Dad!'

Ange giggles and runs between the seats, her bum in the air like a baboon. I feel the stainless steel through my middle, blood floods the back of my throat. Angie babbles, jumps up and down, shakes the train.

'It hurts, Ange!'

You check Graham's trousers. You say, shocked, 'His willy's missing! Find it, Tess! Find it!' You give me the job. I hunt under the train. I look on the seats of the coaches. You watch me, all urgent, like there's a train coming, *'We've got to find it!'*

I hiss at Angie, 'Help me Ange, this is serious!' But Angie pretends to be a puppy. She chews on Graham's shoes, hanging there on the gravel. Graham's eyes bounce off her head, get back to his TV.

I wake to the sound of a train, a dry blast, bearing down on us. I wake with a burning throat, a burning heart, look straight into the sand eyes of the Israeli girl. My spine tick-ticks, echoes the wheels of the train. For a while I still worry about Graham's thing. I worry that you need it, Ma.

The siren stops. Starts again.

It's a fog horn or something, blasting across the bay.

The Israeli says he's got swimming squad. Hustles us out, goes off in his Porsche. Leaves us on a stinking rich street. Everyone staring at our Met outfits. Annie's all happy today, like she knows where she's going. She's in some kind of hurry. We catch a taxi with people from the Hout Bay squatter camp, tryna get to their families on the flats. Some of them going to the suburbs to work.

'Seven days, seven days,' says this African nanny, rubbing her eyes. On her way to babysit some white kids, so their parents can chill on the seventh day.

We've gotto take a train from Wynberg. I'm desperate for clean, ironed underwear and a proper dose of pills. I had my last two Syns this morning and it's nearly midday. While Annie's choosing some hairy peaches, I sneak off to the chemist in Station Road. Think they'll dispense without a saak, cause the

poor people catch trains, the ones who can't pay for doctors. The pharmacist sounds Dutch, I think. A string bean. Hair hanging stringy, like a drummer in a band. Adam's apple like a cyst. I ask him for Adcodol, cause I'm out of bucks. He questions me. 'What for?'

'I had a car accident.' I point at my skull. 'Terrible headaches.' It's my Met dress that makes him suspicious.

'For how long?'

Geez, the prick. 'Twenty four hours, sometimes. All day and night.'

'When was the accident?'

How many of those braces behind him would fit on his knobbly neck? I could fit three, turn him into an Ndebele.

Annie's shouting, 'Tess! Tess!' The train's whining to leave.

I feed him, 'Two thousand and two,' but the guy shakes his head.

Bastard refuses me.

Annie's already on the train. Everyone's watching me.

'Now everyone's staring man, Annie.'

Annie looks round the coach. 'Hemel, Tess. So what? What's wrong with you?'

My hands are sweating, I'm turning into some slimy species. The sun is killing my eyes. I pull my knees up. Lie my head in the shade.

'Don't talk to me.'

The train rocks me, rocks me.

I worry about the dream, worry that I didn't find his willy. I woke up too soon. Funny there was no blood, though, no blood in the dream.

That's when it hits me.

No blood.

There's been no blood for a long, long time.

The train rocks me, rocks me like it did on the cliff with Hanif. But all I feel is sick, sick, sick.

Never mind, I tell myself. Never mind.
I always bleed off and on.

I've got a whole story up my sleeve. I'm gonna say I twisted my ankle in my snake heels. I'll say it happened right now, buy some ice. I'll ask for beta blockers, 'Something like Adcodol will do.' The tired pharmacist is on her computer. The assistant's counting stuff on the shelves. They miss me limp through the blue light from the stained glass, right across the shop.

Her silver name tag says Sybil. Her blue eyes are washed out. Her thick curls have gone a bit yellow, like she's been on the shelf for too long, in a shop where the lights are always on. Sybil looks over the top of her glasses, 'Hello, Miss Peterson.'

She always does it. She always shocks me. She remembers my name from a real prescription, that time I got herpes in my mouth. She comes round her counter. Can you handle it, limps up to me.

'Is there anything I can help you with?'

She's got a bandage on *her* ankle, can you believe.

'Uh ... just some tampons. And some Adcodol for the headache that goes with it.'

She smiles, but her eyes go worried.

'It's monthly,' I say.

The magic word works again. She goes to fetch Adcodol, very slow. I choose tampons, start scanning the shelves for a pregnancy test.

A woman walks in. Same height as Sybil. Same build. Same strong curls, but they're red. She's wearing a long red, silky skirt, her bum's a massive heart shape. A red stretch top with half sleeves, slung melon boobs, her arms soft at the top. Silver toe rings. Sandals, orange, with see-through beads. A long 'Hu-llo' to Sybil. She goes through the blue light, into the sunbeam in front of the dispensary. 'How's your foot?'

'Umm. Sore.'

The woman's scalp is stained red. Home dye. 'Why don't you go home?'

'No one to stand in.'

'I'd stand all day for you, Sybil. But I'd kill the village.' Sybil laughs.

I find the tests. Twenty one bucks. Shit.

Red Scalp says, 'You should be resting. Take a turn on the Laziboy.'

'Ralph wouldn't share it.'

A 'hmmph' from Red Scalp.

On the back of the box there are squares with lines. One's got one line, the other's got two. I look closer. One line's okay, two lines are bad. I peep inside. A long plastic thing, too long for my bag.

I shove it up my sleeve. Looks like I'm hiding a flippin mouth organ. I whip it back out. Sybil's coming back with my pills, a funny look on her face.

Shit. I think she spotted me. My fingers sweat on the edge of the note. Just give me my pills.

She gives my pills to the girl at the till. Limps back, mutters to Red Scalp, 'It's not like he beats me or drinks or takes drugs.'

Red Scalp answers, 'Too blimmin lazy,' but I'm the only one who hears cause the door bell clangs. A woman comes in, holding her son's hands out in front of her. Brown hands. Pink rash.

I'm out of there. Don't give a shit about any rash or any lazy boy.

I swallow five in the beach toilets. Shut my eyes to block out the grimy wall, school yellow. It's in my mind, must be, cause I ease up on the spot. My nerves go on holiday straight away.

Back at the flat, Madeleine calls me to look. The lifesaver contraption's in the middle of the room. Noel's stirring a plastic jug of red chemicals, splashing with his plastic spatula. Madeleine stacks more red tubes in her tiny deep freeze. Red bompies, plastic sacs of sodium benzoate. You'd think they're flippin gold bars, she's so proud.

'Wow.'

I think of you, Ma. Angie said you freeze fish after fish after fish. Show off your deep freeze every chance you get.

When I go, Madeleine says, 'Come back for a cold one.' Sweet.
Even after the pills it shoots a splinter into my chest.
It's not like I even asked for a bompie.



The Monday straight after the races, Annie wakes me up. Nearly bang dents in my door. I try open my eyes. A seagull shows off on the station roof, lifts up, shuts its wings, lands. The one with the whiplash, maybe.

I let Annie in, collapse on the downstairs bed. Vrygrond's far from here. She must've been out all night. 'Penzance, nê?'

'Nee.'

She opens my balcony door, hooks it in place.

'Ah, kill it.'

'What now?'

'Kill the sun.' I shove my face in the pillow.

'Luister, Tess, I came to tell you. Are you listening, Tess?'

'No.'

'Man ...'

'I need water.'

She grabs a glass, goes into the bathroom. Gives me a sopping glass. I lift my head, get a good look. Annie's got her hands on her hips. All damped down and glistening. Shirt so white it's cruel to my eyes. I gobble the glass.

Where does all the water go to? Litres of water. My hair still dry, my nails still cracked. Evaporates in the wind, maybe.

'I'm going to Joburg.' Annie's eyes are dark stars.

I think she means for the weekend.

'How come?'

Annie sits on the bed. Takes her bubblegum out, shapes it with her fingers, 'Darryl's got a job.'

'You going with *Darryl*?'

'He's been asking me for a long time.'

'You said it was finished.'

'He was sulking.' She smiles, all shy. 'He was dikbek until I said yes.'

'You didn't tell me.'

'Because you always say boyfriends are bad news.'

I nod. 'They drop you, or ...' I lay on a look, 'take over your whole life.'

She chucks the gum back in her mouth, pumps her jaws. Shrugs.

Annie's lost. She's got blue jeans on, all the way to the ankles. Her shirt's got a collar with a tiny flower print. Geez, what's cutting? I sit up, check out her shoes. White Adidas takkies. Brand spanking new.

'Where'd you get those?'

'Darryl.'

I dunno why, but her white shoes make me remember.

Flip, no blood.

Annie chucks in quickly, 'I'm paying him back.' She hates being a take.

I ease back on the bed.

No blood.

And the clinic's closed on Mondays.

Annie gets my glass, finds Coke in the fridge. Trillions of tiny pops as she pours. 'We had to use his credit card to shop for Joburg. He's broke now, but they're gonna pay him big marcha. And I've got a job in a glamour bar.'

'A what?'

'It's a series called Suka. He's the ladies' man type.'

'Oh ja?' Like I'm surprised.

She gives me the popping glass. 'He thinks he's so bok but the women don't smaak him. He's a lech. In the show.'

'What's a glamour bar?'

Annie does a fantastic boob whipping thing. Grins like a hot, stage star. 'A topless bar.'

'That's okay with him?'

'He says it's okay for now. But we're keeping it secret.'

'Oh.' I let my silence talk.

'You'll smaak him, Tess. He's a bird lover.'

'So?'

'So, you're always saying, look at this bird and look at that bird.'

Annie's going to Joburg.

'What happened to you never leaving Cape Town?'
'Ag, I can't last without him. They shoot for six months.'
Six months. Something pulls out of place in my chest.
'I'm gonna bath.'
She gives my ankle a little pinch. 'Okay, Tess.'
Annie's thinking about her man, she's already left. She pats my
shin, 'I'll see you, my kind.'
She's up and gone.

Go, just go.
I climb the ladder.
Suka means go in Zulu.
I count out my breakfast lot. Wash them down. Fight back a
heave. Eat some hard cheese. I run a bath, crouch next to it.
Watch the water rushing. My eyes wanna cry, I dunno why.
Shit. An old lech in a Zulu TV play.
And I'm not a bird lover.
That's how well she knows me.

I lie in the bath, watch my toes till I don't care Annie's gone.
Annie's stupid. It's not like anyone's gonna see past her tits. I
mean, how far's she gonna get in a headless bar?
Next door, Madeleine's singing gospel, I think. But anything
she sings just sounds like grief.
I lie there, my skin drinking water.
Tomorrow, I'll go see Sister Brown. Do what I have to do.

I soak till I don't care. Till all I wanna do is eat fish.
I walk all the way to Shoprite for pilchards. I buy mashed, sub
standard. Cat food, actually. I chow it till the last chunk. Only
then do I smell that it stinks. Drop the tin from the top, clean
into the bin on the street.
I iron my undies, brush my hair till it shines. When I look again
it's turned to straw. Put on my yellow dress, ultra short, but
innocent. No two ways, I've got to score.

I take the bridge along the pavilion. Don't even make it to
Sunrise circle.

A Neighbourhood Watch oke's covering for the beach police. What a joke. The cops eat lunch while the Watch relieves them. When the Watch goes home, the cops smoke and tell jokes. Okay, there's one fitness fanatic cop, sometimes walks to the end of the catwalk, writes a few fines for dogs off leashes. All around him, the gangsters deal.

Neighbourhood Watch watches me walk the curl of concrete up to the bridge. Level with the sombrero roof of the pavilion hall. He's a little oke, chubby. Blonde ponytail with a boiled egg on top. One foot up on the bench, talking into his walkie talkie like a real policeman. My yellow dress stuffs up his game. Surveillance gone stupid, cause his mouth hangs loose and his eyes go blind, like they do when a man's brain empties.

Nicotine moustache. Signet ring. Aftershave, smells like Axe.

'You wanna have sex with me?' I ask him straight.

He blushes so the holes in his skin stretch. 'I'm on watch here.' But all there is to watch are perfect white gulls, catching updrafts. Two perfect black men with their trousers rolled up. Catching sea water in coke bottles for muti.

'When d'you knock off?'

Neighbourhood Watch squints at the station clock. I help him, 'Twenty to two.'

'At two.' He scans the sea like maybe he'll find crime in the waves. I shrug off my dress strap. Let half my bra show. A bra's as good as a boob.

'I'll wait for you down at the bottom, near the toilets?' I whip the hem of my dress. Flash my g-string.

A frog sits on his voice box. 'I've got the keys to the hall.' Jiggles keys in his pocket.

'What else have you got?'

His moustache blows out, blasts a laugh. He looks out to sea.

'I mean, have you got a hundred bucks?'

Shakes his head. 'Fifty.' Bastard. Bargaining.

I can't afford to argue.

I wait at the back door to the hall, under the brim of the sombrero. He loves being watched, the Neighbourhood Watch. Tightens

his bum, pulls in his gut, struts up and down where I can see him. Points a straight arm, hard finger at some kids dumping their cooldrink cans. Ooh, hard core. Smokes with short, manly drags. Talks into his walkie talkie. Checks the bins, for bombs maybe. Meantime that ugly Merrick, Bonita's boyfriend, moves fast to the end of the bridge. Waits for the Watch to knock off. The pickup point's right above the beach police office. Safe, cause the cops are too slack to crane their necks. Two o' clock, Neighbourhood Watch walks slowly to the hall. Behind him I see Merrick take a package from a kid. Take the spiral stairs down.

'Merrick!'

He jerks, faces the danger.

'How's Bonita and them?'

He flicks a finger at his neck, whips it sideways.

'What?'

His anger's like a head butt. 'I do'wanna talk about Bonita.'

'You fighting?'

'I do'wanna hear about Bonita.' He goes off, score in his pocket.

The wind bats his words my way, 'I'll fuck her up.'

Neighbourhood Watch chooses a spot among a whole stack of trestles. Uses his spit to speed him. Gross. Kills himself not to grunt. No need, cause every sound is sucked up by millions of metres of royal blue curtain. Neighbourhood Watch is a pap broek. The slightest sound, he jumps off, rolls himself up in the curtain. Leaves me bent over, bum to the hall. There are birds up there in the roof. Seagulls meeting in the high point of the hat. Halfway to heaven, but they still make me knuip. I eye the sign to the ladies, the little chick with the padded bum and the umbrella.

Every bang, every swish, Neighbourhood Watch hides in the folds. A window in the wind, wings against a rafter. For God's sake get finished.

Shame, he can't do it. He's too scared of being bust. He might refuse to pay so I hop on top, eleven knee bends. I watch a gull pull a piece of French loaf off a window sill. Jab at it, one eye

watching our stunt. Eleven knee bends and he's shuddering, his stumpy fingers clamped over his mouth. Even then, watching the hall with wide eyes, ready to fold into the blue.

I wash over the basin, loosen my bra. My nipples feel grazed, I dunno why.

Neighbourhood Watch waits for me, fretting to leave. But it's like the seagull's waiting for me, too. It takes off from a chair with a piece of bread the size of its head. It flies top speed, right through the foyer, straight for the glass double doors in the front. I squeeze my eyes shut. Wait for the smash.

The smash doesn't happen. Bloody clever bird drops to the floor, waits like he's first in the queue to get out.

'Have you got keys for the front?'

'Ja, but we're going out the back.'

'Just let the bird out.'

The seagull flies up in the air, sails back to the chair.

Neighbourhood Watch dangles the fifty. I take the money, don't snatch. The gull flies into turbo, races again for the glass. It swoops through the foyer arch, straight for the glass.

'No-o!'

Silence instead of a crunch. It stares through the glass, waiting.

'Ssssh man. Are you mad?'

'Let me let the bird out.'

He finds the right key. Shrinks into the curtain. I stalk the double door. Pray the bird doesn't panic, start thrashing. Polite, it shuffles sideways. My fingers slip on the key, my feet damp in my sandals. The door opens easy. The South Easter's been crouched, hiding in the hall, cause now it tries its best to blow me out. The bird paddles into the wind, grips its bread tight. It catches an air wave, up towards the mountain, up towards my flat.

I chuck the keys. They skid along the foyer floor.

I give in to the wind, blow out the front door.

Bonita's at the beach, sitting against the women's change rooms. Staring straight ahead. Merrick's next to her, his knees up. I don't know what he did with that score, cause neither of them

are stoned. Just furious. Bonita's lips are clenched together, she's staring a hole in the broken old Empire. But Merrick's stare's a black stare, a tunnel to terrible memory. Don't ask how I know, I just know.

'Hi. You finished for today, Bonita?'

Her glance at me is friendly, considering she's just been slicing brick.

'Yes.'

'No.'

'I'm not going again.'

'She's not finished yet.'

'I am.'

They stare ahead. A battle happening somewhere in the air.

'You take my money, you force me to work.'

'I look after the money.'

'Where's it then?'

'I keep it safe.'

'That's what you said yesterday. And what did the girls eat?'

She looks at me. 'He smokes white pipes, this ou.'

I nod like she's telling me he grows his own tomatoes.

Hit the quickest road to my flat.

I end up behind that Red Scalp from the chemist. She walks fast down Melrose Road, clicking her fingers like she's walking to a beat. Each step unhooks one half of her bum. A little dog runs out, its liquorice nose sticks to her toes. A pack of kids play soccer, shout in African. A stocky boy dribbles a lemon against a car tyre, his back to his attackers. A skraal kid with long legs tries to get it, but the boy passes, laughs, shoves Long Legs out the way. He falls into Red Scalp. Red Scalp gives him a mock klap. Asks, 'What happened to your ball?' They show how it went high in the sky, into the yard of the broken Empire.

A white Citi Golf pulls up, idles in the middle of the soccer game. A kid dropkicks the lemon over it. A tanned oke in white tennis clothes leans across the seat. Says to Red Scalp, 'Come for a swim.'

Another car pulls up, gets stuck behind. Red Scalp looks back at a purple cottage, a low wooden gate with a curvy women

carved in it. In the front garden, a big lemon tree. Tiny birds flash between the leaves. She grins, gets in. 'I'll swim in my bra.'

The soccer match parts for the car. Slazenger rackets, a cage of bright tennis balls in the back. Long Legs gets the lemon tied by skill to his feet. The Citi Golf stops again. Red Scalp holds a ball out the window.

'Wally, please leave my tree. So I can make lemonade.'

The kids cheer. Someone swipes the battered lemon into the gutter. Its yellow skin is weeping juice from its beating.

I quickly walk away from the lemon. From the disturbance of birds, their wings spread like flowers between the branches. I dunno why, but I think of Amanda. How she must have cried before he poked out her eyes.



Tuesday, I'm ducking down the stairs, little Josie comes up, Bonita's youngest kid.

'Hi,' I say. Wait for Bonita. Expect to see her come up the stairs.

'Where's your mom?'

Josie shakes her head.

'What you doing here, girl?'

I try herd her back down the stairs. I've got to get to the clinic, get tested.

'Merrick bites my mama, Tess. Here and here and here.' She touches face, her arms, her stomach.

'Ag, nee.'

'He hurts my ma.'

'What, now?'

'Last night.'

'She must get shot of him.'

'Tell her Tess.' Josie starts crying. I squeeze the sides of her head, hold her brain in place.

'Where's your ma?'

'Feeding the pigeons.' Sounds safe.

'You not going to school?'

'Mm-mm.'

‘Ok, I’ve got stuff to do, then I’ll come and see.’

Josie sniffs something up the down pipe, dislodges a flippin frog.

‘Geez, that’s a good sniff!’ She giggles. Holds my hand across the road.

I unpick her fingers, send her back home past the tattoo parlour, over the train track.

I’m on the hard bench, shallow breathing. I’ve given Sister Brown a sample. Dark lemon colour, with things floating in it. Pilchards and painkillers is what she’ll find. Please God, not a tadpole. Sister Brown put a thin blank strip in it. Left it on her window ledge, in the sun.

I wait outside her open door, more sun coming through a high window with little glass nipples. I know from the chemist’s test. Please, no lines. I pray the litmus strip stays white. There’s a young girl waiting with a baby. She carries it over her shoulder like a towel. Eesh, if I had a kid, it’d get killed by the trucks.

Sister Brown asks her, ‘Baby here for vaccinations?’

‘Yes. He’s six weeks’

‘I won’t be a moment.’

She goes back in, does some paperwork. Checks her watch. Writes some more. The mother sits down, lies the baby on her lap. She fusses, wipes sour milk from its mouth. Cleans its ears with her fingernail. The kid’s got no lashes. Just fresh new eyeballs. Its hands spring open every now and then, in funny little frights. Its tongue exercising. Its got ruffles of loose skin round its neck. No chin, like a turtle. It arches its back, opens itself to anyone’s hands. The mother strokes it, checking that it’s real.

Sister Brown’s making me wait.

Please can I go back to how I was. I don’t want a baby.

Sister Brown’s mean enough to believe. She prides herself in being right. She’ll tell me.

She has a loud conversation on the phone.

‘No, the mother can’t have her baby with her. Her mind is going, it’s the HIV ... If she’s crawling around looking for her child,

her dementia's got worse ... I told her last week we gave her baby to her mother ... How do you know this? ... Well why is the child being left in the room all alone? ... Has anyone phoned the employer and told her the baby must be with people? ... How else is he going to learn to walk and talk? ... But how long has the granny been working for this woman? ... Give me her number, I'll talk to this madam. I'll tell her the granny's worked for her for thirty years, now she must let the grandchild into the house.'

She dumps the phone, pissed off.

Sister Brown checks the window sill. She calls me in.

Sister Brown's a flippin haughty bitch. She's got long cheek bones, straight shoulders. She walks with flat feet. She looks at you level, straight in the eye. Maybe I'd like her, if she liked me. But she shuts her drawer hard like she wishes it was my fingers. She grinds her chair back, wishes the floor was my face. Her eyes snap, snap, snap like a slap, slap, slap. She fetches a round card with a drawing pin in the middle, a cardboard arrow.

My chair's the same as our old school chairs. Chipboard. Red. 'I don't suppose you can remember having unprotected sex.' Her accent's all haughty, but she comes to work in a Mannenburg taxi. She doesn't give me a chance to answer. 'Well, then, when do you think, was your last period?'

'End of December.'

She bangs down the sample. Pulls out the strip.

At first I think it's blood in the vee of my legs. But the gush is too much. The seat is slanted so it runs in a weak waterfall. I expect to see red, but the stuff dripping onto the floor is yellow.

Yellow is the colour of my wee as it drips.

And pink is the colour of the line on the strip.

I'm washed off the rocks. My heart pouring. No skin to keep me in. Not even the pain pills stop me dissolving. I turn to water like when I was small. Scared to ask for another crayon at school. Scared to speak. The birds tryna get in. Sharks tryna tear my calves off my shins.

The dark tryna strangle me, squeeze the life out of me.

'You're eight weeks.'

I kick the door closed with my takkie. Sister Brown's worried about the violence. She stands up carefully, waits to see what I'll do.

My bladder's empty, now my eyes start leaking. 'The valves have gone,' Graham used to say, like I was some kind of car.

There's no baby. No way.

Sister Brown pulls paper towel from the wall. Drops wads on the wet. Gives me a whole sales speech. Says I'm lucky cause it's legal. Lucky ...? I can't hear properly. I just hear some words, '... responsibility ... support ... free ... suction.'

I'm emptied out on the floor.

Nothing left.

There's no baby.

No way.

She writes me a note for the abortion.

More flippin luck, there's a clothing collection for the Vrygrond kids. Sister Brown finds me a camouflage catsuit for a ten year old. Thin at the knees. Outside, the one mother's flippin multiplied. A whole queue of women with different sized kids. I stagger past them to the toilet. Past a woman with a baby doll stuck to her breast, sucking like a maniac. Lips rolling in, rolling out. I force the catsuit over my hips. The pants part reaches my knees. The top half only fits if I drop my shoulders. The seam cuts into my fanny. Sister Brown gives me a plastic packet for my wet dress. Gives me my letter for Jan Van Riebeek hospital. Says, 'You've got a month left.'

In tight camouflage, I go into the daylight. Up the hill, past Shoprite.

God, I'm seasick. The tar swells up, rises up to the mountain. I keep my eyes on the robots at the top, red light, green light, orange light, red. A sign of dry land, close to home. The pavement throbs under my feet. The music's so loud, the taxi joints buzz. The rapper's raging stuff like, When I was in the womb, I was

amped to get out, something in me said kick, punch, fight. Get the hell out.

How's that for flippin crazy?

There's a white woman airbrushed on the side. Blonde hair in a cloud, hotpants on long legs. Bum to the cars behind, looking back, cheeky. The big sticker on the window, Man United. The taxi hangs onto the handbrake hill, waits for green. The rapper ends and the radio guy booms, drowns out all the heavy revving, 'Okay, news on the hour. A father, mother and a domestic worker have been arrested for allegedly using a four year old in a sex orgy at their house on Saturday night.' This police spokesman guy comes on. 'It all came out through the crèche teacher,' he says. 'The little girl told her they rubbed cream on her and raped her.' A new voice, a psychologist. 'The child had been behaving strangely for some time. She was abnormally obsessed with her genitals. This obsession is a common response to an ongoing cycle of abuse. They learn to associate their genitals with love ...' They cut her off halfway through talking. The newsreader shouts something about the US Secretary of State, '... the death toll in Iraq ... mass murder ... terrorists.'

It's like a rock from the mountain broke loose and crashed through me, leaving an empty hole for the wind to whistle through. I fold over, shafted by shock. Rubbed cream. Terrorists. Genitals.

A young woman touches me. She's got a baby blue top on, her whole brown stomach is bare. Her eyes clear like mountain water. 'What's wrong?'

I eat mouthfuls of air, force them down. I wanna run. Run to my flat, fly up the stairs, hide from the cars, the clear eyes. I get to my feet, but the cars keep cutting across, they won't let me pass. They won't stop even when I push the button at the crossing, over and over.

I'll hide at the sea.

My feet swing down the slope. I've gotto cross the railway line, get to the sea. The same sea as my home sea. The East side, the warm side.

Outside the tattoo shop, I stop against the glass. A baby girl, obsessed with her genitals. A girl, a pet, rubbed with cream and raped.

I hurt. I hurt.

The face in front of me flashes like a hawker's jacket. Full of studs, sleepers, chains. He keeps his distance. Maybe I stink of pain.

'Lady, what's up?'

'Bugger off.' A baby girl obsessed with her genitals.

Metalworks goes back to his shop wall, pinned with butterflies, dragons and flames. A brindle bull terrier in a choke chain lets its big bony head fall on its paws. It slides onto its side, its legs out stiff. Metalworks plants his long legs on a table. Chains looped under his boots. I wanna cross the line, get air from the waves as they break. The sea will cover my crying.

But the railway gate's shut. People waiting. No sign of a train.

Across the road there's a coffee shop. Some people watching me. People with friends, people with hobbies, people with collars. A stick insect woman steals the froth off her little boy's milkshake. But the boy's watching me, worried. He points. His twin brother stares. Their mother stands up, smoothes her dress. Skraal and knobbly. Unsure.

I force my legs. Go up the slope before she interferes.

Skip the sea.

My baby will be smeared with cream.

The bull terrier's ribcage lifts and falls.

Legal and free. Like a shot to the head. Or a suction.

It's quick. They'll rip it out by the roots. Tear off its air.

I'll go tomorrow. Let them suck it out, flesh off flesh.

Give me sudden death any day. Don't ask me to watch anything die slowly. You in your burrow, hiding from the sun.

I won't pump it with pills. I won't. It's a brand new thing. It must die quick.

Fear hangs off my ribs, swings in my belly.

Nothing will ever be the same again.

My breath catches on spikes, I must strike the fear down, but I won't take pills. It's not like I'm addicted.

I stumble into Blu Bottle, sober as shit. Buy Tassies. I won't poison it with pills, but I'll have a drink.

This time the cars stop.

I lock my door. Drink one glass of Tassies for me, one for the Princess. Stay out the loft.

Henrique comes to fetch the week's rent. I hold the money through the door. 'I'm fifty short. I'll give it to you tomorrow.'

'You must make sure. Otherwise, Bernard.'

The thing is, I don't really drink. Sometimes I knock back a glass when my pills feel thin. Graham taught me not to drink. His dad drank like the living dead.

I sit on my broken chair on the stoep. Watch the tops of the trucks sliding past. Watch the drunkards roll into Blu Bottle. Simon the Scribe's outside, his mane looks sticky, even from here. He shouts at the cars, tells them they're careless. Tells them they feel rocks for the poor. 'Do you think we are blind? We know it's a global racket. We know. We are impoverished. We are indigent. But we are not blind!'

He went to UCT. He's blind drunk every day but his pickled tongue still chucks fancy words.

More Tassies, in the bath. I don't need pain pills.

I put on one of my ten kimonos. Air Japan. Nice and silky with aeroplanes on. I got a whole box from the guy who gave me the wet wipes. An air steward. I scratched through the cubby hole, looking for a tissue. Needled him a bit, 'So, why don't you get the air hostesses to give you a blow job?'

'I try. They laugh at me when I ask.'

'You got any wet wipes?'

For some reason he thought that was funny. Made me get out, look in his boot. He had boxes of Wipe It Clean wet wipes. Boxes of kimonos. Boxes of traveling toothbrushes. They all fell off the back of a plane.

I sit in my aeroplane kimono, rock on the old office chair. The rocking helps my spinning head. Like when you're running with the wind behind you, you don't feel it. I try read the TV mag, even though Annie's gone. The actors all have fat smirks. No rehab shots for me. I down another glass.
It can't be born, cause it'll have to go on a leash. And if it's a girl it'll get raped.
I flatten the bottle, can't remember much, but I'll tell you what I can work out.

I threw my name away at False Bay Holiday. I vomited over the balcony. Thanks to the wind, I got someone on the head. The Xhosa family in number six. 'Hayi wene, isifebe!' Bitch, they called me.

'Sorry.'

I vomited again, got someone on the cheek, someone looking up.

They hammered on my door. I crawled out, tried to kiss their feet, I swear. 'Sorry, sorry.'

I sat on the top of the stairs. Oh my God. Tilting, but not going over.

I pitched. They jumped. I lurched back onto my bum.

When Madeleine tried to pull me back to my flat, I fought like I was being arrested. Screamed something, God knows what.

I threw my name away at False Bay Holiday.



miracle number two

Madeleine brings me my legless night with four sugars.
'Bos will fix you.'

Flippin refugee, but she acts like she invented Rooibos tea.
Sunlight sticks splinters in my eyes, mice with razor nails run
inside my head. I need what's in the belly of the doll.

Funny, Madeleine knows something, but it's the boy who's got
this wise face, checking me out. It doesn't stop him bouncing
on the bed, freaking the mice out. Madeleine puts the tea on the
floor, pulls him off.

She's got granadilla pips or something exploding on her dress,
purple seeds shooting in green. Her eyes are varnished like the
buck eyes at Rhodes Mem. I try the tea. A lead weight in my
head thunks to the front, concusses the mice. I burn my lips,
spill the tea. Noel runs to get me water.

'That wine made you not walk.' Madeleine blames the wine,
points at the empty bottle. 'It made you shout.'

'Ah, no.'

I've gotto get up that ladder, get her and the sun out of here. But
Noel brings me water, just like Annie did. It lurches and drips
above my head. I fight with my kimono, take it before it tips.
Glug it like there's no tomorrow.

'What was I shouting?'

'Ooh hooo.' Her short song tells a long story.

I drink some tea with four sugars. Burn a coat on my tongue.

'I told you I'm pregnant, hey?' Sheez, first time I say it, the new word drowns me with hot, hot shame. But Madeleine sings something surprised, spreads her arms. Thanking God for a flippin win. She's a shadow over me, a dark blessing. She wraps me up, soft. The boy crouches on the floor, puts out one finger, touches the blanket near my stomach.

'Didn't I tell you last night?' I mumble into her skin.

'No.'

'Then what did I shout about?'

'Ooh hoo.'

Now it's something cruel she's singing for me, keeping for me.

'I can't have a baby. I'm getting rid of it.'

Her hands, thick skinned like feet, clap over her mouth. She shakes her head, her hefty legs make her dress shiver. Noel asks something in African. But Madeleine says nothing, just stands up straight. The sun darts past her, spikes my eyes. I roll onto my stomach. The mice start a lazy race.

Cold silence behind me.

Noel climbs the ladder. Out the corner of my eye, Madeleine seems tall to the ceiling, her arms folded over her heart. Noel fiddles up in the loft. She reaches up, takes him. He disappears into her chest.

She goes out quietly, accuses me with the door's quiet click.

Shit.

What's it to her?

She's nothing to me.

Madeleine's sewing machine shoots the mice down dead. They start rotting straight away. But it's my breath that stinks. God, why the hell is she sewing? What happened to the nice, quiet bompies?

I've gotto make money. I'm short with the rent and after the suction, I'm sure there'll be blood. I'll have to stay off the road for a bit. Shit, man, I don't even have bucks for the taxi. I climb the ladder, keep my eyes half shut. The coating comes off in my sweaty palms. I swallow two Adcodol with the tea, only two. That's what they say on the box. I wrap another two in a square of toilet paper. Stick them in my sling bag. Two can't hurt the

tadpole. Two now, two at lunch. Then I'll go get it sucked out, that time on the cliff.

I never have real orgasms. I don't want to. It's horrible, like a fit or a stroke. Short circuit of the flippin nerves. Ag, I know how to masturbate. If the pump action leaves me with an ache, sometimes I fix it. I hardly ever want to though, and when I do, I keep it small. I'm not into the shattering, the scattering. No thanks, me flying apart like I've been hit by a flippin truck. And I've got to put myself together again. It happened once with Warren the bouncer, that boyfriend of mine. The prick could lick. I hated the blown apart feeling afterwards. I expected to see bits missing in the mirror.

Idiot gloated.

And soon after, I found out about the photos.

Two's not enough. I get out two more. Princess is watching, hoping I won't.

Let her see. Let her see.

She and Madeleine can say what they want. It's better than having a baby they rape.

Princess keeps smiling her calm, cement smile. Full of trust.

I chuck the pills back in the doll, plus the two from my bag.

I can wait. I'm not flippin addicted.

I force down stale chips, Greek Lamb. Try drown out the sewing machine with a cookery programme on the radio. Some chick talks about cracking the rib cage, forcing the stuffing in. Way too painful. I switch it off. Just let the Singer machine drop into the hollow spots in my head. I'll kiss feet again today. Make bucks, operate.

But I'm pathetic in the mirror. My freckles sticking out like snail's eyes. I dunk myself in the bath. Get into my jeans, the ones with the waist band I chopped off with the bread knife. A red stretch top that says 'Disco.' On the road I'll be bright, like Road Works in Progress. I shock my eyes white. Get the hell out, my hair still wet. Brittle as a flippin pretzel.

On the way down, I see Madeleine through the door, feeding her machine with a colour so pretty, it's ridiculous. A purple with a pulse, looks hot to the touch. She's got those ugly glasses on. Behind her, little Noel works the bompie machine.

Limp Lennie spins off the circle, picks me up. Oh, God, not another session of flog the donkey. Flippin manual labour. He says, 'I've been to the circle three times today, looking for you.' What for? Maybe crushed by his last flop, wants to show who's boss. With metal, maybe.

I get in. I need the bucks.

I fret big time when he says, 'I haven't got money, I just wanna give you something.'

'Hey, look, I need to make money today.'

'I'm sorry man, pay day's next week. I'll be quick.'

Cut me quick. Kill me quick.

Two's not enough, I'm edgy as hell. I try suss him out, but all I get is his darkest blue eyes, hiding out. The veins in his temples resting.

'Aren't the grooms there now?' I try be casual.

'Ja, but I just wanna give you something.'

Flip. My eyes grip the steering, swerve to the side.

'So, where do you work?'

Where can they find him if I don't die.

'Goliath Shock Absorbers.'

'There in Steenberg?'

He nods. 'But I've got the day off.' He sighs like *his* life is over.

The horses are out in the paddocks. A guy carrying hay. 'Hello Eric,' Lennie says. I watch Lennie's eyes. No secret message to Eric. But Eric gives me a look like he knows what women are for. Lennie goes into his reserved stable. I stay put, near the car. Another oke comes past, pushing a barrow full of shit. Stares at me. The sea's still there, at the end of the tar track. Cars go past, slap at the view. I'm a wreck, man, not enough pills. My breath bumping along my breathing pipes. Nerves squeezing my bladder. I've gotto get to the hospital, and what do I get? An impotent oke, a couple of grooms. Maybe I'll die today, at the

end of a flippin hoof pick. I get my toes out my sandals, in case I've gotto run. Keep an eye on the dark doorway where Lennie went. The first groom's still staring, filling a water bucket. Lennie comes out, something in his hand. Dark, with angles. I dig my toes in the dirt, get ready. My skin's pricked with thorns, my heart pumps blood, chucks it onto my eardrums. I check his eyes.

See only pride.

Still, I step back. Then I see it's a wooden horse. A shining, living, perfect horse. Galloping, ears forward. Wood polished like skin.

'I made it.'

My lungs still ready to run. 'Geez.'

The wooden horse gallops the air.

Maybe the bastard's tryna get a freebee.

'Why you giving it to me?'

'I felt bad about last time.'

I relax a bit. It's not death. It's confession. Still, my voice comes out high, jumpy. 'It happens, you know,' My laugh's a mean cackle. 'Too much Sta-Soft.'

'No, I felt bad that I picked you up.'

'You married?'

He nods.

'Why don't you give it to your wife, then?'

'She doesn't like my horses.'

He's tryna get pity. Tryna make me do another whole stable number. Forget the bucks, take the horse instead.

'She thinks I'm running away when I should be fixing things. She goois my horses in the garden if she sees them in the house.'

I haven't got time for this. 'So why don't you go home and fix things, then?' I'm thinking fix the doors, the sink, the floors. He circles the horse's neck with his thumb and finger.

'What's the use.' A runaway nerve races up his jaw. 'All my sperms have broken necks.'

Sheez, I crack up laughing. 'What, like whiplash?'

He blushes. His smile seems to hurt him. 'It's true. And it works on my nerves. I can't ...'

I try stop laughing. 'You can't get hard.'

'It feels like I can't fill her up. Chantal vreet cake in the day and the night. She's a cook, but now she bakes for herself also. The one night I found her there in the kitchen with half a chocolate cake gone. She was sitting there crying on the cake. I asked her, why are you vreeting like this? You can't be hungry. She said she can't help it. She said she feels empty.' He sighs, 'I can't fill her up.' He pushes the horse into my hands. A present for me. First I'm laughing, now I dunno why, the whole damn thing makes me wanna cry. I stroke its smooth, round stomach. The muscles in its rump launching it forwards. I crank out, 'Thanks.'

Geez, the wrong thing to do.

'I've got a whole lot. Come and look.'

'I can't!'

But he's gone, into his stable.

I go after him, thinking shit, man, shit. Clop, clop, clop, my shoes on the cement. The smell of cattle, fur, molasses. The canvas in the corner half covering chunks of wood.

In the cement trough, a stock of wooden horses.

He lies some on the scattered hay. One foot miniatures in yellow, chocolate, chestnut. Rearing, trotting, charging. Some just standing like in a police parade. He picks one up. It's stretched forwards, its teeth bared. Vicious eyes rolled back. 'She's a real skollie.'

I get it then. It's the horse with the white wrapped round its nose. The one that made him smile that day.

'I'm the only she doesn't bite,' he boasts.

I dunno why but it makes me sore, the way his love spills like that.

I make him drop me off near the flat. I need to dump the horse, take another two, cause I'm useless. Leaking sweat, all shivery. I wanna cry all the time, panic scratches like cat's claws. As I get out the car I force some words through my stinging teeth, 'You should carve your wife.' It's like, instead of thanks.

The morning's over and I've got no bucks.

I'll just take two and go again. Just two.



That was my plan, Ma. Take two and get to Jan Van Riebeek. Geez.

Little Noel's outside False Bay Holiday, selling bompies from a cooler box. A bigger kid helping him. Noel forces a frozen bompie on me. The big boy complains, but Noel's stubborn. It freaks me, everyone giving me presents. I dunno, I feel flippin touched.

Madeleine's still drilling when I get up the stairs. I shove at the lock, balance my things.

'Tessa?' She gets my name wrong again.

'Tessa.' Madeleine grips my elbow. 'Please come to do my needle.' I'm shuddering inside, begging for pain pills. She asks, though, like it's flippin critical. Her eyes shimmer and swell, pulled by her thick glasses.

The purple cloth's turned into a skirt. Small waist, spanned out wide. Spread on top of a whole pile of others. Blood red. Emerald green. The colours of precious stones. Now, in the room, sapphire blue's running free. I grip my wrist with one hand to cut the shaking, clamp my teeth on my breath. Stab the cotton through the eye on the third time. Try get away.

'Tessa, I want to tell you about my daughter.'

I nod like mad, 'I can't talk now.' She holds on, traps me with her big brown hands. I wanna scream, slap her away.

'Not now.'

'It must be now.'

'Not now!' It's nearly a shout.

'Because of the baby.'

I swear the day goes on forever. Hardly any pills. A big, big problem to fix. And the whole world tryna suck me into their life.

I sit on Madeleine's bed, shivering. She keeps her arm around me, a smooth dragon's tail. Whenever I move it coils, squeezes. She holds me in a river of flippin blue. Reams of silky blue pinned under her needle. It climbs a chair, falls sheer down the back, runs blue to our feet. She keeps one hand on my knee, reaches between her feet. Pulls out a buggered up old suitcase from under the bed. Scuffed like old shoes. Made of pure leather.

Under the bed, Mom, a suitcase. Just like you. Your Sensual Secrets.

She opens the case. A pile of beads burst with colour when they touch the light. She lifts them. Underneath them, crazy colours of African dresses. The colour of every warm fruit, every flippin incredible sunrise. 'Every time, when I make a beautiful dress, I make one for her.'

A spark of curiosity fires, but I shut up. Swallow my pills for the seventeenth time in my mind.

'We tried to bring her with us. But she wouldn't come.' She loosens her grip, the dragon distracted by grief.

'Sorry, man.' I stand up. She pulls me down, ever so gentle. As strong as those freaks on TV who pick up cars with their hands.

'How old is she?' I ask.

'She is twenty five. They stole her when she was thirteen. They took her for sex. For Abatara.' She spits the name like a swear word. 'He is a Rwandan general who helped Kabila to get power. But afterwards, he would not leave. He is high up in the RCD.'

Sheez. Like I know what any of that means. I stare at the horse, see how its tail sails in the wind.

'How old are you, Tessa?'

'Twenty six.' Shit, the same age.

'Today she is free. But she would not come with us.' She makes a funny moaning noise, then takes a deep breath, sucks up all the spare air in the room. 'She lives in the streets of Goma. She is so ...' She twirls a hand at her head, showing crazy. She pinches at her fingers. 'She puts the rings from Coca Cola tins here. She does not even ask for money. Men pay her with rubbish. They

cut copper pipe, they pay her with that. I suppose they rape her too.' Madeleine twists sideways, stares out the window. Throws the rape on the waves.

'She has a sickness of the brain. It must be Aids.'

The callbox rings outside. Madeleine turns to stone, no jokes. She sits stiff, listens. A voice answers, then silence. The room gets heavy with prayer, I swear. A new voice starts babbling, all happy. Madeleine turns back into flesh, carries on. 'They let her go when she got sick. She is full of sores. She thinks ...' Madeleine smiles in the saddest part. 'She thinks she is a queen.' Her eyes beg something from me, I dunno what. 'The men follow her and the flies follow her, but she thinks she is a queen. She lives in the bush. She will not live in a house. She lived in the bush for eight years and they did things to her that made her forget who she is. In Goma the men call her La Reine de Miel.' Her smile is gone. 'Queen Honey.'

'Does she remember you?'

Madeleine stares into the blue pool. Shakes her head. 'There is an old lady there who knew my mother. She takes food to Genevieve. She wraps her plate in silver paper. She walks on her knees into the bush. She calls her Queen to make her eat.'

Madeleine's sad as hell, but her tears don't drop.

I've got to get across the river, get across the cloth. Take my horse and get to my loft.

'We were loyal to Laurent Kabila, Honorius and I were. The Rwandans helped Kabila, but then they wanted too much. They killed him. We were loyal to Kabila's son, Joseph, but the RCD stayed in the East. They took our village over. And they took Genevieve to punish us.'

Her suffering fills up my nose, my mouth. I struggle up, False Bay Holiday tilts a bit. I squeeze between the sewing machine and the wall.

Madeleine begs, 'Come help me. I need your eyes. I must finish the skirts by tomorrow night.'

The wall dips away behind me. I flatten my wet hands against the plaster.

'I can't.' I can't wait a day.

Back in my loft, I take two Adcodol. But two's not enough.
I look at the horse, I wanna cry. I look at Princess, I wanna cry. I
think of Madeleine's daughter, her Coke tin rings. Me with my
wet wipes. I wanna cry.
I can't get calm. I can't go to the road. I'm useless. Waterworks.
I take another two to try blast the bullshit, but I think of the
tadpole, cringing, twisting like a fish. Not a pretty flip but a fit,
a spasm. Suffering.
I go down the ladder. Stick my finger down my throat. Vomit
up my only chance of peace.
Madeleine at my door, 'Tessa! Tessa!'
Stuff off. Leave me alone.
'Tessa!'
I let her in.
She looks at my stomach. 'You are sick?' All I can do is cry. She
tries to hold me, but I twist away.
'Come help me sew. The dancers will pay tomorrow. You take
fifty rand for a skirt. I take one hundred.'

It's not like I've got any choice.

I prick my fingers all day. Sew on sparkling sequins. Brilliant
skirts slipping in my shaky hands. Madeleine gives me some
putu and curried fish. Three bites are heaven. I can't touch
the rest. Noel brings cold coins with cold hands. Fetches more
bompies from the deep freeze. Each time she holds a one rand
coin to her cheek. Says, 'Aah, nice and cold.' He repeats it,
learning English. 'Good boy,' she says, and sends him back. He
gets wilder each time, giggling like a mad thing. His tongue
Ferrari red, he starts chucking the coins into her lap.
'The sugar's making him crazy,' I say, but Madeleine just makes
me sweet, sweet Rooibos tea.

One rand a sequin. Fifty sequins a skirt. Fifty bucks, same as a
blow job. Or a cheap jump. I sew the rands, I sew the minutes.
Sequin by sequin, I sew the time through the day. This way no
one gets to touch my thin skin. On the road my nerves would

be shot, my skin would be screeching. The sun hissing through the salt air.

Instead I sit listening. Shaking. Pricking. Madeleine talks to me, doesn't mind I don't answer. She hems slowly with her bad eyes. Talks to me all through the day. Every now and then she goes dead still, like she's praying. Then I figure it out, it's the trains. Every time a train pulls away from the station, Madeleine stops talking, stops sewing, waits. Then she starts up again, tells me more terrible stories in a calm, sweet voice.

I remember the colours.

I'm sewing gold sequins onto emerald green cloth when she tells me how her husband saved her eyes.

'The people in the village said he was a coward. But they do not know how it makes you, when the rebels take your daughter. They do not know your mind, when they take your child and use her up.' She ties a knot, snaps a thread. 'I kept acid in my house. For if they came back.'

She gives me her needle to thread. Watches me battle like it's me who can't see. 'He came back. Abatara came into my house.'

The thread goes in by pure bloody accident.

'He did not know who we are. He came to warn us all to vote for him.'

I lick my finger, try pick up a sequin. Knock a whole pile of gold onto the floor.

'Everyone gave them the beer to drink. Not me.'

I try pick them up with my fingernails.

'He asked, How many people live here? I said, There were four. Before you took my daughter. It looked like a devil jumped onto his back. I picked the acid up behind the door. I threw it at him.'

I stare, feel my mouth hang open.

'I missed. I missed.' She shakes her head, like she's still sorry she missed. 'They held me down. They laughed. They held open my eyes.'

Madeleine holds up the red cloth, checks her line is straight. The sun pours red light onto her. 'They poured the acid in.'

Outside, a train pulls away from the station. Madeleine goes still, bends her head to the street. Then she lifts the red fabric up to her eyes. Blinks, dips her needle in. 'Honorius went outside to milk the cows.' She smiles like she's got some sick sense of humour.

'My husband. He knew if he fought, they would kill us. So he ran outside to milk a cow. And when they were gone, he washed my eyes with the milk. He milked the cow, he washed my eyes. He was the one who saved my eyes.'

Me, I try find peace in the middle of a gold sequin. Jab my needle in.

She whispers to herself, 'He is that kind of man. If he is not back, he is dead.'

Her eyes are giant cause of the old man's glasses.

'He does not care about politics anymore.'

They're chocolate sauce, speckled with acid.

'Honorius lives to keep his family alive. If he is not back, he is dead. He is that kind of man.'

Sequin by sequin, I sew through the day. Find the eye with my needle, fix sparks on the cloth. But my shaking fits get worse. They start in my stomach, smack bang in the middle. Spread to my fingertips. All day my scalp pricks with dumb fear. The Shoprite car guard comes in. Madeleine says something. The car guard watches me, cold. Comes back with a little joint. Madeleine gives me an oyster shell for my ash. Says, 'I told Marie you are sick. You are shaking.'

I have a few drags. I sew, then, oh so slowly that Madeleine says, 'Go and sleep.' She puts me in my downstairs bed. Puts the joint in the sea shell, on the floor. Makes sure I see it. Says, 'If you cannot sleep.'

I wake in the night, shaking like a maniac. Drink gallons of water. Swallow some vomit that comes up. It takes six matches to light the car guard's joint. Soon the passing cars are sweet tambourines. Swish. Swish. I blow the smoke over to Princess. Not sure if the smile is her smile or mine.

In the morning, flushing my toilet's like a bell for Madeleine. My first wee, my first flush, her head's round the balcony wall. 'Come Tessa. We have to work.' She holds a new joint in the air. It's weird, like she knows. Don't go up the ladder.

Today she feeds me red beans and spicy butternut. Noel tells her a long story in his funny French, eats with his mouth open. I try that. Eat with my mouth open. Down a whole bowl. Madeleine still wants to talk about her daughter. Now I'm stoned, I can see. She's mixing us up.

I'm sewing silver sequins onto blue silky cloth when she tells me her daughter was a kind child. Friends with all the weak kids.

'She was a friend of the little girl, Allandra, whose father said, no, he is not the father. That made her mother not want her.' The dagga hasn't fully killed my shakes. I wobble my way back into the eye of a needle. Sheez. Try remember it's instead of screwing in the bush.

'Even her grandmother called her a homeless goat.'

Madeleine stops as a train pulls away. Watches the road. Carries on. Talks stuff that could burn like hell if I let it in.

'She was a friend of the little boy whose arm was bent. She would have been a good mother, that child. She had little chickens in her pocket. She fed them every hour. At the school, too.' She spreads some purple on her lap, rubs her fingertips on it. 'They took her from the school with baby chickens in her pocket. The other two girls they took were already fifteen. She was only thirteen. She did not even have breasts.'

Geez.

I try remember my mission. One jump. One skirt. Money tonight. Tomorrow, I'll do it.

I pop pills in my mind. See them going in.

Suddenly she gives me that flippin mad smile. Bossies from the war. 'When she came back I tried to tell her. They did not touch you. No one can touch you. You are not a body, you are a beautiful spirit of God. That is what you are. The rest is

lies. The rest is just ...' She cuts a shape in the air. 'Nothing. A nonsense.'

I remember the colours.

I'm sewing bright pink sequins onto on a red skirt, Madeleine tells me about someone called Phyllis. 'Phyllis used to teach English to the refugees. I went to her English class down there.' She points to the sea. 'Heee, I made her shocked. She was a nun, a servant to God. I said, Phyllis, I can kill today, God does not care. It does not matter. Ha! She was shocked. Every week we argued like this. It was good for my English.'

'I said, Phyllis, you are scared of God. You are scared of the church. She argued with me, then one day she suffered a car accident. She went into the hospital for a long, long time. Six months she was gone. And when she came out, she stopped to be a nun. She started to dance.' The sun trips across Madeleine's white teeth. 'She said to me, Madeleine, I was cold for too long. Now I dance to get hot, hot, hot.' She laughs, chucks the finished skirt onto the pile. 'I said to Phyllis, I know it. I hated for long. I hated myself and I hated them. But then God told me, no one can die. So no one can kill. Not even God. Not the devil. Not the enemy I hate.'

I don't understand Madeleine, but her voice is deep, wraps my nerves in soft, silky cloth.

'I forgot yesterday, for a little time. I was thinking of how I lost my daughter. That is why I was angry with you. But then I remembered your baby cannot die. Even if you kill him.'
My voice sounds like it drifted in through the window.
'Her.'

I think that's the only word I say the whole day.



Madeleine tricks me into it. She says, 'Come with me. You must help me to measure their chest.' Something about the mother city.

Plus I'm stoned as a toad.

It's the purple house with the lemon tree and the dancing woman on the gate. Madeleine's got the skirts stuffed in a striped plastic sack. The front door of the house opens into a huge room. Music chanting, instruments you pluck, from somewhere in the East. A wooden floor. One wall is just mirror. Women in tracksuit pants, rolled down at the tummy. T-shirts tucked into their bras. Candles lit in curling candlesticks, even though it's still light outside.

Madeleine's a celeb in this place. 'Aah,' they say as we walk in. A flippin choir of smiles, all because Madeleine's bringing their skirts. They eye the bag. They're not staring at me. I check to make sure. They're definitely not.

Noel chases a cat, catches it in the corner. It snakes onto its back, taps him with its paws. He rubs the fur on its belly with a hard, flat hand. That Red Scalp from the chemist is up in front, the one who swims in her bra. She's in black lycra longs, a tight orange t-shirt that says Corenza C. Above the lycra's her belly. A dish of white flesh, I swear. She smiles at us. Maybe a trick of the mirror, the air spits out light. Maybe there's glitter in her lipstick. She's huge, this red dyed woman, but big with muscle. I look at her big, white feet, rings on her big toes. She could be an older Ange. She moves out of her stretch like she's doing water ballet. The Corenza C makes me click. A slow, stoned click. She must be Sybil's sister. Sybil from the chemist.

Red Scalp waves us towards a room off the side. I think we're gonna sit somewhere and wait, but Madeleine dumps the bag, goes back into the big room. Leaves me in the kitchen with too many grapes. Tumbling green grapes, off the table, onto the floor. And a tower of lemons about to fall. Through the kitchen, there are ferns. An inside courtyard. Glass flowers, other shattered

shapes on a wall. The sound of running water. Noel runs past carrying an upside down cat. It lies cradled like a baby.

In the studio, Red Scalp says, 'Okay, we're going to grow up now, lengthen the spine, up from the hips. Now tuck in your tail.'

I peep through the door.

'Drop, Nora, drop that arch.'

I suddenly see all the cats. Tortoiseshell most of them, blending with the knotty floor boards. Some of them closed up in circles. One's spinning, patting at some flying insect. One strokes figure of eights round the legs of a bench. One cat sits high on a shelf, blinks at the stretching women.

On a wall, a black and white photo of a nun in a silver frame. But the rest of the room's full of mosaics and feathers. A lamp with blue tile chips on it, some white feathers stuck into it. Peacock feathers hang from a painting of pink dancing shapes. Tiny tiles run high in a line on the walls. In the corner, fabrics hang on a line of hooks. Reds and blues and greens, just like Madeleine's. But also sun yellows, sand yellows, ochre and gold.

Madeleine's pulled off her dress. Underneath she's got pink toweling pants. A green vest with spider's web lines. Her brown stomach bare to the cats and the candles and the whole wall of mirror. Madeleine calls me in, says, 'Come.'

Some of the women turn and smile at me, forget to grow up or whatever. A tall woman with hair on springs, with a straight, strong back. Straight nose, like a pale Egyptian.

A young Indian woman with a nose ring.

The one Red Scalp called Nora. I've seen Nora before. She's that thin, crispy woman at the coffee shop. The one who saw me crying.

Some others, all flippin shapes and colours.

'Now find your wings.'

I stand there, lost in the flippin wild. Tricked. Red Scalp nods at me. Plain friendly. 'Let your muscles span out until you are broad.' She faces the mirror, her bum a black beam. 'Ready to fly.'

I stick out my arms, feeling shy from my insides.
'Feel your wing span.' Red Scalp sounds close, kind, like she's known everyone all of her life.

My arms are so, so long. Abnormal I think. Gently Red Scalp says, 'What's your name?'

I'm sure I don't say.

'Tess, move your wings, from here.' She presses a fist, soft, in my back, one in my chest. 'One up, one down.'

'Bend your knees, Tess.'

Stuff off. I was tricked in the first place.

She pushes my shoulders. I resist.

She chops the backs of my knees, soft. Laughs softly as I sink. A stoned giggle comes out of me.

'Now ...' Red Scalp spreads her fingers over her fanny bone.

'Find that first belly muscle, it's like a sling. Tighten, hold.'

I see the tadpole slither away.

Red Scalp walks over to Madeleine. 'Got it Madeleine?' so kindly it's like she can't be talking about a fanny muscle.

Madeleine nods.

I only get it then, I swear. Red Scalp's the nun Madeleine was talking about. The nun who got cold from praying.

'Number two is a tight band between your hip bones. Got it?

Now, three is right behind your belly button. Pull, that's it, don't release.'

She faces the mirror. 'Your belly button should disappear.'

Her fat cat stomach turns into a gum tree trunk, flat, white. Her belly button heals up, vanishes.

Weird.

I try it, like she said it. One. Two. Three. Pull and hold. My belly button hides away just like hers.

Cool.

The stretching's done, they dive into Madeleine's bag.

Their fingers flick, they clutch the cloth, let go. Pinch, touch, shake out their new skirts. The sequins are a big hit. They pull their skirts on, go close to the glass, sway to watch their skirts move. Crispy Nora ordered emerald green, that green

like polished banana leaves. The tall, tall woman with the hair springs ordered the long, long yellow, the kind of yellow that makes spit squirt in your mouth. Surprise surprise, Red Scalp's got the red. She looks like war, a fighting queen. She stands manly in front of the mirror. No music. The women watch, the dust stirred up. Sailing hair from too many cats. A hissing kind of silence.

She dances.

Geez. There's an animal in her belly, growing from her hips, grafted to her ribs. Flippin watery contortions, thrusting, rolling figure of eights. Thrash, thrash, she cracks the dusk with her hips. Snaps the air with her skirt, whipping it red. Her arms, her fingers, snaking, raking. Seaweed. Snakes. Then I see they're wings. Gliding, dipping, stroking. But her feet are the hooves of a horse. She stamps like a stallion, rearing, spinning, hammering her heels on the floor. She's wild, this bitch. Grinning red glitter, silver rings on her toes. Going into war, dead happy. Geez.

Nothing like the photo of the nun on the wall. A younger face, ironed smooth at the eyes. Stiff white robe like a paper doll. No hair in sight. Now she's got a hairdo, ridiculous red curls tripping.

Madeleine claps the loudest at the end. Red Scalp laughs like war's for fun. Goes over to the CD player. 'Remember you're in water. When I was lying in that ditch, close to death, I saw that the whole world is fluid.'

She pushes a button. On the CD, women chant from under the ground. A low echo, vibrating. 'We are all flowing water. Feel the fluid in your body, the thin skin of your cranio sacral sac, holding you together.'

What the hell is a cranio sacral sac?

'Go through the chatter, all the noise, to your God self.'

I look up, nervous about this God stuff. There's a pregnant bulge in the fabric ceiling. Something stuffed in rolled up cloth, ready to fall. Something slung like a carcass.

'Ready? Contract your belly, one, two, three. Pull up on one side. Hold, drop! Up. Drop. Drop hard!' Then she sings gently, 'Other side.'

I swear to God I'm belly dancing. Shik. Shik.

'That's it!' She sounds surprised, 'Nice, Tess!'

Up, drop! Shik, shik. Shik-shik, and it's dead. Shik-shik, suck it out. Cut it out.

'Hee haa.' Red Scalp's a cowboy.

No more days. Shik, shik, a razor cut. Shik, shik, a lightning strike.

Graham sits on the toilet seat. Feet apart. Checking for ticks. Checking, his fingers in the cracks. The smell of engine oil. Train driver's fingers.

Oh, God, I hurt.

I hurt like when I heard the taxi radio on the hill. It cuts me down. Madeleine helps me up. Red Scalp with her. Shaky, shaky. I'm shaky.

'Are you alright?'

Geez. My tongue swollen like I'm lost in the desert. All the blood in my body laps in my ankles. Red Scalp's palm in the hollow of my back. Madeleine pressing on my chest. Red Scalp's voice with love in it, 'When you isolate, you open your navel chakra. It's the centre of your sexuality and your emotions. It can be a shock.'

I can feel Madeleine and Red Scalp's eyes meeting, there above my head. She says quietly, only for me, 'When it opens, we start to take responsibility for our hips. We start to say no.'

The others carry on, casual, like everyone collapses every now and then. Madeleine measures the women, between their shoulder blades, across the tips of their nipples. They giggle. The Egyptian says she's tired of carrying her breasts around. Crispy Nora says she'd take the leftovers any day. They joke like that. Fork out from their purses.

Me, I'm faded to a thin, flippin trickle. A loose thread. Tricked into horrible pictures by this place. The sagging ceiling, the falling grapes, the shik, shik, shik.

Graham with his fingers in a little girl. Sis.

Madeleine gives me my bucks outside. She holds Noel against her chest, pats his back. His eyes open, shut. Open, shut. The late train pulls away, Madeleine waits, listens. Sighs and walks. Checks out the dim stars, faint from street lights. Starts saying thanks for helping. I interrupt her, 'What did I shout when I was drunk?'

She stops. Says straight, 'You said you killed your father.'

Not a single bit of blame.

'What?'

'You hit him with a something.'

I was crouched on the back of his bakkie. Through the window, into the cab. 'I hope you have a stroke and die!'

My face in the wind. Power for a second. A cable connected between heaven and hell.

He laughed so his broken tooth showed, wiggled his fingers through the window. I slapped his hand. Flexed for the go slow hump in the road.

My laugh is ugly, even to me. I put Madeleine straight.

'No, man. I just *wished* he would die.'

It wasn't Angie, it was me. My wish hit him once. Cruised the sky over Africa, hit him again. His metal wheelchair, the perfect conductor. But the stroke struck him useless instead of dead. Now he lives for TV, maybe Sinbad in the afternoons. Soft porn after midnight.

I try smile under the streetlight, make it nothing. But my face is paralysed and my voice carries a whole flippin dam.

'I didn't kill him.'

Christ. Never again. I'm not touching dagga. It's poison that stuff.

And no way I'm going near that belly dancing place, Red Scalp and her sagging ceiling.

I take two Adcodol again. Stick the rest in one of my mockroc boots. Lock my wardrobe, so all that's left in the doll is a key. But there's no way in hell I can sleep. I'm sweaty, I'm melting, but I'm flippin ice cold. I get funny cramps in my legs, then a huge fist round my middle. I dry heave. Retch nothing but memories. The tick thing.

I still got tick bite fever as a kid.

One little tick sat on the glands of my neck and sucked for dear life. In the hospital I wore a gown perfect for deticking. String knots and fresh air at the cracks. The bed dizzy miles from the ground. My arms laid out on the white sheet. I couldn't move them. The nurse was a bitch. She cranked up the bed, talked in a scary, sweet tongue. Like she's seen somewhere how humans talk to their young.

'It's home time for me. Let's get this down now.'

'No.' Did my voice come out?

Out of her white dress came a white bowl, white icecream. The spoon too big, a metal spade to shove icecream into me. I shook my head, but she kept shoveling. Cruel, creamy, cold. I swallowed, tried to choke, 'No.'

The vomit was a cold, hard blast. It covered her chin like shaving cream, ran down into her collar. She wiped it, wanting to kill. She dropped the spoon, ducked under the dizzy, high bed. I didn't see her again. She left me with my dead arms, dribbling dairy.

The cow. I can't remember her face.

Graham said he was sorry he didn't check in my hair.

Oh God.

Graham checking for ticks. That's all he was doing, wasn't it? He said, 'Don't forget to check Ange before she gets in the bath, Tess. Come here. I'll check you.'

I would have got up and gobbled more pills, for sure, if Bonita and the girls didn't pitch up that night.

A whisper at my lock, 'Tess!'

I'm up like a shot. Smash my shin on the downstairs bed.

Bonita and her girls are huddled outside my door. A piece torn off Bonita's cheek. Purple half circles chopped in her arms.

They nearly fall into my flat.

'He stole my rent. They threw us out.' She holds out her arms.

'He bit me.'

Bonita makes sure the door's locked. The girls wrap together, sit on the bed. Sharonne wears a little satchel. Packed for attack.

They give me the whole, horrible story, whether I want it or not.

'He stole my rent every time. When I told him, give it back, he just said, Shut up.'

'Shut up *hoer*,' Sharonne says quietly, keeping facts straight in the middle of the night.

Bonita snarls, 'He said he loved me. But he bit me like a mal hond. The night before last night he brought his friend from jail to the flat. They smoked white pipes all night. These people are mal, Tess, these druggies.'

Josie says, 'His friend kept saying, I'm not a man, I'm not a man.'

'His maat was raped in Pollsmoor. So Merrick ruks him in front of my mirror. He says, Look at you. Look at you. Remember that time you kopstamped that vris ou, from the 28s? Remember you broke his nose? Remember that time you cut the neck of ... some ou. They talked like that, bad, bad tronk stories, all night long. And they smoked white pipes in front of the girls. I told him, Get out! Take your friend.' Bonita loses her fight. Looks at her arms, 'He was very, very goofed, so he bit me.'

Josie says, 'He bit my mamie a lot.'

'He always said sorry. He said it was from when he was a little boy, he bit his Pa to try stop him donnering his Ma.'

Sharonne says softly, 'Don't make excuses, Ma.' Her voice is scary normal. 'They kicked us out. They said, even if we pay the rent, they don't want us. Because of Merrick.'

'The fighting,' Josie says.

'So we slept there at the pavilion,' Bonita says. 'I slept with a knife under my head. He found us there. I cut him, Tess, because he was saying terrible things. Terrible things.'

‘What things?’

The girls stare at their takkies. Squeeze their knees together. Bonita’s voice wobbles, ‘I’m gonna swim in your daughter’s vagina.’ But then a blade flashes in her eyes, ‘I stuck him with the knife.’ She touches her thigh. ‘He was bleeding too much. He won’t come here.’

We all stare at the door.

It’s like Madeleine was waiting, a flippin soldier on guard. Her door sucks open as my knuckle hits the wood. She lends us a mattress and a blanket. Sharonne pulls clean socks out her pack, makes Josie put them on. The girls go head to toe in the bed. Bonita on the floor. Me in the loft.

Me and Bonita lie staring, awake. Me hiding my heaves thinking, tomorrow. When the moon touches Blu Bottle, Bonita curls up, makes bubbling noises. I watch the Princess watching over the kids. She looks real at night, like she’s breathing, for sure. I scrape through the night, sweating, freezing, watching her, watching that moon with a piece bitten off it.

I can cry I’m so glad when the sun pitches up. Princess hardens up, but stays on watch. Josie’s crawled onto the floor with her mom. Sharonne’s rolled up so tight she looks tiny. I creep around. Iron my black undies, my black jeans. My black t-shirt with the two men wrestling. Black, today, in case of blood stains. Bonita and the girls carry on sleeping like there’s a curse on them. But as I open the door, Josie lifts her head. Smiles like she’s seen an angel or something.

I buy dry snoek for the taxi. Crunch my way through the bones. Suck up some orange juice. I’m a flippin wreck on a mission. Get shot of the tadpole, get back to work. At the hospital I’ll make like the anesthetic didn’t work. I’ll whimper a bit, put pain clouds in my eyes. Ask for something to get me through.



It takes two flippin hours to make me a file. Then a long, long wait in a mixed up waiting room. Everyone's got bags of food, extra clothes, geez, like they're camping. Down the corridor, doors that say, Gynaecology, Prenatal, Obstetrics. Only the nurses know what's cutting. They make sure not to look in our eyes. Just the yellow wall behind us, then down at their scrappy pile of files. They shout out names into stale air. One tiny, white nurse, one humungous black one. Voices that can't afford to be kind. Next to me a girl of maybe fifteen, in a dorky pink dress, hair swiped to one side. Her stomach already fat.

My other side, a thin lady who makes me think of my doll. A belly that could maybe clip off. All out in front, neat on her lap. A cream outfit, a false plate of little grey teeth. She's smiling like her horse just came in. She's keeping the kid, I take it.

I buy Nik Naks from the trolley. Crunch them. False Plate watches my orange fingers, cheese flavour, trembling. At the end of the corridor I can see the hospital pharmacy sign. In red, a beautiful big arrow.

Next to False Plate, a young girl with a stars and stripes bandana. A shiny blue tracksuit. She must be from the Americans gang. She unwraps some white tassels. Inside's a new brown baby with bushy afro hair. She rocks it on her knees like she's got music in her head. She's got that proud look. Opens up the blankets for False Plate to see. Asks, 'Don't you think he's a little bit yellow?'

False Plate looks close. 'You can usually see by the eyes.' False Plate checks my Nik Nak fingers, compares. The huge nurse comes close. Stares at Bandana's bundle. 'What are you here for?'

'I came because he looks a bit yellow and they said ...'

'Wrong waiting room. Postnatal's on the other side. Past the pharmacy sign.'

The teenager in pink keeps checking my stomach. But as more women get called, she tucks her chin in, swallows air, shit scared. Shit, she makes *me* start feeling twitchy.

'How many months?'

Flip, wrong question. Tears rush into her eyes. 'Four.' She croaks, 'And you?'

'Only six weeks.'

'Are you married?' she asks.

This weird shame rushes in. I dunno why, but I make up stuff.

'We're *going* to get married.'

'Oh.' She's disappointed. In a lost voice asks, 'How long have you been going out?'

'Five, six years.'

Shit. Five years ago I was in my third escort agency. Five years before that I was finished with love.

She tries for some love points, 'I'm going to a matric dance next week.' She whispers, 'I hope my stomach goes down.' A drop falls on her dress.

My stomach's in a tight ball. The pharmacy sign tortures me more.

'What you gonna wear?'

The right question, this time. She lights up, 'My auntie gave me money. I bought me this black dress, it's got silk in the bodice ...' She goes and tells me the whole dress design. She pinches at the pink dress, 'This isn't mine. My auntie borrowed it to me. I usually dress more cool than this.'

'Your auntie knows?' I nod at her tummy.

'My auntie knows but not my pa or my ma.'

'Where's your auntie?'

'Her doctor wrote a letter for me, but she didn't want to come in case my pa finds out, then he'll hate her later.'

'Why didn't you tell your mom?'

Her face screws up, 'My mamie would moer me. She would say I'm a slut.'

Sheez, some flippin furious thing lands on me, takes me by surprise.

'Did she ever ask?'

'No. She thought I was being good.'

Bitch. Useless mother.

I hiss, my lips tight with hate. 'Why didn't she ask?'

The girl nods, wipes wet cheeks with her hands. 'I would have said yes.'

I hate her mother. Useless bitch.

They call more names, Pink Dress starts talking fast. 'I came yesterday.' She points at her fanny. 'They put something inside to get it all ready. But my friend said the baby's going to haunt me. She says her cousin's baby came back as a ghost.'

She's asking me.

I wanna tell her I lied. I'm also getting rid of mine. But Nurse Huge calls, 'Margaret Johnson?'

Margaret grabs my leg, sinks her fingers in.

Nurse Huge frowns at her folder, says, 'Are you her aunt?'

Margaret hangs on like I'm her flippin Siamese twin.

I kick my folder under the bench.

I swear, I end up down the passage, Margaret crushing my finger bones. We go straight into an operating room. A Hollywood handsome doctor with wavy grey hair. Stuff all character. He doesn't look at Margaret's face once. He should look at her shit scared eyes, talk to her nicely, but he's some kind of cannibal. It's like he's gonna cut out a half alive beast, eat up its organs. He lines up a whole stack of silver tools. Doesn't ask how she's feeling, just checks his forceps and his knife and other long, metal things. He gets this rubber tube ready, runs his vacuum pump for a bit. Gets all ready to go inside, take what he wants. Eat her insides while they're still warm.

This nurse has got puffy, hair curler curls. Freckles like mine. Tired lines creep down her cheeks. She's got a nice, soft mouth, but she scrubs her hands, violent. She dries them rough. Talks kind, 'I know you have already had counseling, but are you still sure you want to do this?'

Margaret nods, holds tighter to me.

A ghost comes out the corner. The anesthetist, a tired old man with a long needle, for feelings. He says his old, old lines, 'Something to make you comfortable, something to make you feel easy.' His hands like flaking leather on her young, green

vein. Eina. It's in. He fades to the corner, waits. His old hair dyed brown, like a corpse fixed up for the family to come see. He just wants to retire, I can tell. He just wants to stop feeling.

Hollywood sticks his fingers into Margaret's stomach skin, makes it move like a water bed.

'Which way?' asks Nurse Puff.

'Head up,' he says.

Nurse Puff asks Margaret nicely to open her legs wide. Margaret's knees shake like crazy as they go down.

Dr Le Grange did that to me. Went inside my legs.

Nurse Puff says, 'Just something to numb the cervix.'

I touch Margaret's eyelids, quick-quick. 'Don't look.'

A flippin huge needle goes right into her.

The doctor takes his time, gets his forceps. Goes back inside, makes Margaret jerk.

'Is it sore?' Nurse Puff asks.

Margaret shakes her head, tears running straight down her temples.

He tunnels inside with metal. Jerks hard, makes Margaret's stomach jump.

I'm already feeling dizzy, tryna swallow my dry tongue. It freaks me the way he goes inside her open legs. Into her soft, young body.

Like Dr Le Grange, when I was a kid.

Geez Mom, that was nothing.

A flood of blood. Burning red in that bright, bright light. The doctor twists his hand, brings something out. Oh my God, it's got toes on it. Perfect, tiny toes. Dumps it in his silver dish. I clamp my hands over Margaret's eyes, put my face against hers to block it. No way in hell I'm gonna let her see. I whisper to her things I don't believe. I whisper the things that Madeleine said.

'The baby doesn't mind. It's a spirit, not a body, so it can't die.'

He goes in again, pulls out some more. I don't look, just keep saying, 'And it won't haunt you, cause it doesn't mind.'

My hands over her flooding eyes. Out the corner of my eye, slippery bits go into the dish.

'It's nearly done. Not much more.' Nurse Puff bends over the silver bowl. Starts arranging the bits, I swear. I can't help it, my eyes just look. It's a jigsaw puzzle kid. Tiny thighs, perfect feet. Torn off arms. Some messy big bits that are maybe its tummy, mashed up. The doctor waits. The nurse nods at him. I think, thank God it's over, but he goes straight back in with his forceps. Finds something, squeezes hard. I swear I hear a soft crack. I can't stop looking, I'm flippin hypnotised. A crooked mask comes out, crushed and leaking. Real baby eyes hanging skew. Nurse Puff covers the dish with a cloth, takes it out. The evil doctor will eat it, I'm sure, with more silver instruments. With a bib made of hospital cloth, in the back room when we're gone.

Now he goes into her with a knife. Scrapes some shreds out. Puts the tube up her fanny, turns on his machine. Wet sucking sounds. Nurse Puff meets my eyes now. Looks sorry, oh so sorry. Like she's sorry the doctor didn't once look at Margaret's face. Like she's sorry he broke the baby in pieces. Like she's also sorry Margaret's mom didn't ask.

Nurse Puff gives me a pack of antibiotic pills. Says, 'We've treated the bleeding, but if she starts to flood, bring her straight in.' She gives Margaret a Sparkle to suck, like she's been a good kid.

I catch Nurse Puff on the way out. Whisper, 'Why didn't he just suck it out?' Thinking, like mine.

'He was too big. We only aspirate up to thirteen weeks.'

'He?'

She looks nervous, like she just made the jigsaw kid real. She nods.

I pack the pills in Margaret's bag. I help her to her taxi, straight past the pharmacy sign. I keep my folder, break hospital rules. Margaret can't smile, but she sticks her arm through the taxi window. Her pen's got a pink rubber bear stuck on it. She writes her number on the cover.

In my taxi I eat a whole bunch of tiny bananas. They're warm and yellow as yellow. They taste like they've got the sun in them, which is good, cause I need another day.

On the way, you won't believe the sign in the chemist at Lakeside. It's like someone saw me coming, I swear. Relief! Half price Syndol.

They'll be suspicious cause I go there a lot. But I'll spin them that I've just had a womb scrape.

I can't. The tadpole's cosy, still in one piece.

That's when I click. Stupid.

Stupid. I should have gone back.

Shit. I should've gone for sudden death. Told Nurse Puff I was there for me.

It's Friday. Two days before they open again.

Stupid bloody idiot.

I'm stuck with the tadpole in my stomach. Margaret's torn up kid in my mind.

And ugly new day dreams about Graham.

The tears swim upstream, squirt up past my tonsils.

I should've gone back.



It's madness in my flat. Smashing pans metal music playing on the radio. In one corner of the room, a pile of black bin bags, stuffed full. The girls are sliding across the stoep on my chair.

'Mommy's fixed it!'

Bonita's fixed the wheels and is making fishcakes. Maybe like yours, Ma, from a fillet of snoek. Nice, raw balls. She starts a frying marathon. We eat them as they turn brown. Geez, they're lekker. Bonita's got Tassies in the fridge. Says, 'It's the fashion, did you know? To chill your red wine.'

Josie pulls the CD player out of a black bin bag, shows me the two prongs don't fit in the wall. 'Have you got a plug to make it work?'

'Uh-uh.'

Bonita's in the mood to talk. Her old landlord's stored the rest of her stuff. No sign of Merrick. But while she was out she heard the fishermen marched in Kalk Bay today cause only the big wigs got new quotas. Some little pipsqueak, somebody's son from the government, got two tons of lobster and Sam the sea dog, one of her regulars, got nothing. Now they're saying they're just gonna poach. Fuck the government.

I don't wanna hear news of the world. Bonita sees my freaked out face, thinks it's the kids. Calls them to do their homework. Josie won't. She makes coffee, dips some bread in it. Bonita says, 'Don't let it fall.' Josie lets it fall. Fishes it out with a spoon. Sharonne works on her Bushman project. She looks like a beautiful bushman girl, sitting there on the bed, with her wide apart eyes and crinkle cut hair. Pleated pink skirt. A red top that says, Maybe Baby. She's gotta take it off, but I can't say your mom's a prostitute and there's a drug addict boasting he's gonna have sex with you. Bonita's convinced the kids that every oke who's ever screamed 'Whoore' from their car, every kid who says so at school, is talking rubbish.

'Fuzigish are playing tonight at the Independent Armchair Theatre, here's Tammy Plankton talking to Will the trombonist ...' Madeleine comes in like the radio announced her. Holds up a string of tiny brass bells from a Bata Toughees box. Full of bells and beads, and things on strings. The girls dip their fingers into the box, greedy fairies, mad for treasure. Madeleine lets them fiddle, tinkle the bells. Says they're for the belly bras. She asks me, 'Will you sew them on?'

Right now, I'm still useless for the road. She pays me for the bras, I don't need to take my nerves to the tar. Get pinched and pulped, with nothing to get me through.

'Okay.'

'We will go at six. They can tell you which ones they love. They can choose.'

'No! I'm not going back there.'

'No?'

'You can ask them what they want.'

‘Maybe I will forget.’

‘Uh-uh. No.’

I’m staying away from that ceiling, those patterned cats.

Madeleine shrugs, goes back to her flat with her shoebox of shiny stuff.

Sharonne gets stuck with her homework. ‘Mom. Mom. I left my ruler at school.’

‘So?’

‘So I need to draw an arrow.’

‘Do it with your hand.’

‘It has to be very, very straight.’

‘Rubbish, man, draw it with your hand.’

Sharonne starts to panic. She likes things right. Her fringe dead straight. Her nails all slick.

‘It must be very, very straight, Mom.’

Bonita says, ‘Josie, have you got a ruler?’

Josie’s eating sugar from the bowl. ‘Nooit.’ She starts coughing. Bonita looks for something straight.

‘Just use the lid of the tea tin.’ I’m on my way to get it and, BANG! There’s a terrible blast. Pain in my face. The swivel chair shunts on its wheels, whacks against the balcony wall. Its back smashed. A fat hole through it. Stuffing sticks out, wiry red hair. The top of the balcony wall’s gone in one part. Powder on the floor. Chips of red tile everywhere. I touch my cheek, prick my finger. Pull it out. Eina. A shark’s tooth of glass. Then I see there’s a bullet hole in the window. Smash cracks all round it.

The two girls lift up, into the loft. Bonita takes the shape of the corner. A ripped hole through the door, the size of an eye. The building has stopped. Silent. Then, shouting, shuffling. More shouting below. Bonita goes on her tiptoes to try see the street, but won’t walk. I crawl towards the door. Open the fridge for protection. Wait a bit. Stinks of egg mayonnaise. The cucumber’s gone brown. Bonita’s Tassies drip dripping. I crawl closer. Peep through the ragged hole in the door. Straight into Madeleine’s eye.

‘Tessa?’

I turn the key.

There's a gathering of False Bay Holiday.
'He's gone.'
'The tattoo man.'
'He shot through the door.'
'Gone where?' I ask.
Marie the car guard says, 'Gone to the beach.'

Hanif comes, and the Pretoria Policeman. They get statements from everyone. Must be the end of their shift, but Hanif's still all neat and shiny. Pretoria hums of garlic. The refugees who saw Merrick trace their necks, tell about the tattoos. Hanif asks Bonita, 'So are you laying a charge or not?' She nods. 'And I want a interdict.'
He gets irritated. 'I don't understand you whores, you pomp the skollies, this is what you get.'
Bonita's furious cause the girls heard. 'Fuck off. Just fuck off and go!' 'Hey!' Pretoria gets all cocky.
'Ma!' Sharonne tryna get her mom under control.
'Ja, just fuck off. Just leave it.'
Geez, I'm disappointed in him. The father of the tadpole.
'The skollies, hey?' I say. Stare at Hanif, 'Only the skollies?' They back off, shit scared I'm gonna say more.
When they're gone, Sharonne starts laughing like a mad thing. Bonita asks, 'What?' Sharonne points at my cut cheek, says to her Ma, 'Now you and Tess are like twins!'

Madeleine says we can pile in with her for the night. We grab some things, hustle in. Madeleine's couch is on its head, against the wall. The bompie machine's in the middle of the floor. Bonita makes me help her shove the chest of drawers against the door.
Sharonne sighs, pulls a surf mag out her bag. Uses the edge to draw a straight line. Rubs it out, draws it ten times. I tell her it's perfect, leave it now. Bonita takes the magazine away, gives it to little Noel to read. Noel laughs at the girl's cheeks on every third page, g-strings up coconut oil bums. Bonita checks the curtains, the door, says, 'Sssh. Sssh.'

Madeleine works the bompie machine, faraway in her brain. Stops every time a train leaves the station. Sometimes she pulls the curtain away, watches the station subway. Bonita crouches down, waits with her. Twitches the curtain back into place.

Sharonne shows Noel a man on a wave that curls like a sea shell. 'That's a barrel.'

Josie mocks, 'You don't even know what's a barrel.'

'This is a barrel, this is!' Shoves the mag into Josie's face.

'Ride it then, go ride the barrel.'

'I'm *going* to.'

Josie laughs, 'You gonna ride the barrel in the rubbish truck, man.'

Sharonne tries out a blazing look. 'Well, you *are* the rubbish.' She says, 'There's a Western Province ou in my class, he's gonna teach me to surf.'

'Haa-aa. A boyfriend!'

Sharonne slaps Josie with the mag. Noel's nervous, forces himself to laugh.

Bonita says, 'Ssh man. What are you arguing for now?'

My nerves are begging for peace. 'C'mon, c'mon. Go learn how to make bompies.'

Noel trusts me now cause I stopped the argument. Climbs onto my lap. The girls press together. Watch plastic sleeves fill with red juice. Red the colour of nothing on earth.

I swear, Ma, it was crazy how stuff kept happening. One thing after the other. The big boy who sells bompies with Noel bangs on the door.

'Ifonela iTessi.'

Tessie, he calls me. Like Angie. Maybe it's her on the phone. Maybe Graham's dead. I scratch at the chest at the door, tryna get out.

Bonita warns me, 'Careful. Watch out.' I run to the phone.

It's Annie from Joburg. My heart lifts up, tries to fly.

'Vok, my phone time's nearly finished now, you took so long to come. How's it with you?'

'No, okay.'

'Man I'm phoning for a favour, Tess. You know my pa was looking after Darryl's house?'

'No.'

'He was looking after the finches for us.'

'The what?'

'Man, Darryl's finches. He's got lots there at home and he's stressed man, Tess, because they bust my dad for dope in the house. The finches got goofed.'

'The what?'

'The finches, man, birds.'

'Oh.'

'And my pa got locked up. Please feed them, Tess. Feed the finches for us. I'm making lots of marcha, I'll help you out when ...'
She gets cut off. Not enough marcha.

Now there's hungry birds somewhere. Shit.

It's freaky in Madeleine's flat. I try hide against a wall, but Noel climbs on my lap. Stuffs a bompie in my mouth, still liquid. Bites the other side of the plastic. His side's covered in snot. I bite my side, suck the unbelievable red, his knees digging into my stomach. He watches my eyes like I'm important. I get up, slide him onto the floor. Go look out the window. Bonita dives to cover the glass, 'Tess, you wanna get shot?'

I put the TV on. There's a talk-to-the-dead medium, his pants nearly pulled up to his tits. He stalks his audience, says, 'I'm being pulled over here. Your dog, is it ... Bob?'

'Bobo,' the lady says. She starts crying.

'Bobo wants you to know that he's with you every minute of the day and the night.'

Madeleine shows the girls how to use the heat sealer. And the trick with her freezer, how to hook the door shut. Bonita twitches, checks things. Noel quietly tears up the surf mag. Hours to go to sleep time. It feels like bricks are falling, trapping me in the flat. All I want is good, easy peace. Some space in my brain. Syndol.

The medium says to someone, 'There's someone to his side, that's brother, sister, girlfriend, wife ... Jane? Janine? ... Jeanette!'

But the family's never heard of Jeanette.

I made up that business with Graham, that business of looking for ticks. My miserable, stoned mind. I made it up, must be, like the twit on TV.

Madeleine puts on her pink toweling pants under her green caftan. Gets out a whole pile of beautiful bras, the same colours as the precious stone skirts. She stands with her box and her bras. Says, 'Tessa, come help me tonight.'

Bonita's ready to shove the chest against the door. She begs, 'Don't go, Tess. He might be watching.'

I whisper, so the kids don't hear. 'He doesn't want *me*.'

I squeeze after Madeleine, get the hell out.

I made up that whole business with Graham.

And if I stay, all I'll wanna do is get the key out the belly of my doll. Chuck my pain pills into my mouth.

Madeleine's caftan blows in the wind, shields me. It's lime green with flying yellow discs, like Red Scalp's lemon tree.

'I'm not gonna dance.'

'Why not?'

'I'm not a dancer.'

She laughs. 'I can dance. You can dance. Anyone can ...'

'How long have you been dancing?' I ask.

'That is my third time, the night that you started.'

'I didn't start!'

'But we don't pay, because we sew.'

'I'm not ...'

Madeleine says gently, like she's on my side. 'I dance to make Phyllis happy. She is trying to help me.'

That's when I remember that Madeleine's also battling. With her husband missing and all.



The belly girls flutter, fly into Madeleine's shoebox. Nip at the trinkets and chains. Lay out their new bras, make arrangements.

Pluck at me, call me to see. Suddenly now I'm a stylist. Sheez, I feel like a fake. Guilty, like someone might bust me.

Red Scalp's on form, Queen Crazy in her new red skirt. A knotted top. Her breasts only just behaving. Barefoot, orange polish on her toes. Someone teases her, she says back, 'Orange is the colour of the navel chakra, didn't you know?' Her toe rings send lasers as she walks on the wood. Red Scalp gives them ten minutes, then says, 'Okay, who wants to shimmy?'

They don't wanna let go the baubles and bells. Crispy Nora asks me, 'Can we leave them like that? Can we carry on later?'

I nod, keep my eyes down. Red snip in my cheek going black.

While they're stretching, I slip out. The young guy opposite's sanding wood on his stoep. I don't wanna know why he's got toilet bowls planted on his stairs. Why there's ruby red roses flushing out of them. He stops working to watch me. 'What you staring at?' I tune him.

He jerks, carries on sanding. I go back inside.

They're on the floor, ankles tucked over their knees.

'Twist from the waist.'

They all twist round, look at me. I can't handle them staring like that, so I sit. Tangle myself up, same as them. Tell myself it's okay. I was just crazy that day. Stoned out my bracket.

The cats pose graceful in the corners. Next to me, the young Indian girl, Suresh, I think. Black silk hair, eyebrows in that perfect aching shape. Egyptian, with her stone cheeks, stone nose. Red Scalp's bright curls, lips like a young girl's. Her feet dead silent as she circles us.

'Remember, your body's hardest task is to carry your skull.' She smiles, 'It took millions of years to learn to do it.'

I know what she means. Sometimes mine's a garage full of junk. Mice bloody mating there.

'So unravel slowly. Let your head come up last.'

When we're standing, she says, 'You are going to shake your pectoral muscles only. She bangs a hand between her breasts. 'Lift your arms from here. Good. Now, shake! Shake! That's it, shake yourself loose!'

Red Scalp's breasts bang together like Spanish knockers. She laughs, 'Shimmy ... Shimmy.' Sends air bubbles up, they pop from her lips in a chain, a giggle. Suddenly I get it. The speed wobble catches me. I'm shaking, shaking like a Grand Prix steering wheel. Can't stop, don't want to. My mouth smiling all on its own. Some women wail, collapse, hang their arms. Some try again, still tryna to find that connection in their chest. Then the laughter takes over all of us, makes us useless, bubbling, hot.

'The shimmy's the best thing to drain toxins. Bad memories. You can use it to drain the fear, to make way for love.' Some of the women giggle. 'Yes, yes, *and* that kind of love. But when you shimmy, I want you to think, I am God.'

A barking laugh comes out of some of us. I'm careful not to look up at the sag in the fabric.

'Because that's what you are.'

Egyptian rolls her eyes, but not nasty, you know?

'If you don't agree, that's okay.' Red Scalp grins, naughty as hell. 'It doesn't change the truth.'

Now the laughter comes easy as music.

'Okay, get your heels down. Small movements, only the heels.' Jig, jig, jig, stamp, stamp, stamp. She drums the wood, fast, faster. So fast she goes out of focus. Legs vibrating, buttocks bouncing, makes a mosaic of her body. I drum, drum, drum with her till I'm gonna break the room into splinters, shiver the mirror, crack it with stress cracks.

'Shimmy! Chest, bum, heels. Don't be afraid. Go faster, faster!' Ugly dreams, shake them off. Shake it off, shiver and shake the horror through my heels. Shimmy so no one can get a hold, if they touch me I'll kill them with my electric shock. Electric shake, I can't stop.

Then I see they're all watching. Wild smiles, laughing cause they just did a hundred revs a second.

I freeze up, go still. They clap for me. Madeleine starts an African wobbly wail. Crispy Nora comes at me, waves a turquoise scarf. 'Tie this around your waist. Then you also have a skirt.'

I chuck my hands up, try stop her, 'No! No!'

'Come on, this is your colour.' She holds it against my cheek. I jerk away, bend my hands like a baboon's, so she can't stick it between my fingers.

'Not turquoise!'

'Why, with your blonde ...'

'I hate it!'

Shit man, there's water in my voice. Crispy chucks the scarf in a corner, brings a cat to life. She stays kind. 'She's so good, hey Phyllis?'

Red Scalp's watching the whole thing. She nods.

While the girls finish choosing shiny things for their bras, Red Scalp says to me quietly, like a blessing, 'You isolate beautifully.'

I feel my mouth pull sarcastic. 'D'you know what I do for a living?'

'I'm sorry, but ...' She shrugs, cheeky. Like she was with the God thing. 'You're gifted.'

Gifted!

Shame like a flippin train, charges through me. Gifted with a leg against the toilet wall. Jammed on a car seat. Clamping on till they roll their eyes, shudder and shoot. That's my job, isolate. Make it quick.

Sheez.

And the drama doesn't stop. What do we find when we get back? A flippin police chick at Madeleine's flat.

The girls are watching a war movie on TV. Except for the grenades blasting sand, the flat is nice and quiet. The bompie machine's all bare. Bonita's reading the torn surf mag, I swear. Noel's on his stomach, watching Constable Chandler's brass bits like he's watching the stars in the flippin sky.

Constable Chandler's pretty from the side. Short hair, sweet nose. Face on, she's got yellow teeth. These stabbing eyes. She's slim like she can't fight, but she can run. Madeleine grabs Noel, traps him on her hip. But Chandler ignores her, comes towards me.

I backpedal out the door, thinking I've been sewing on sequins, not even soliciting. She catches up outside my door, the bloody bullet hole between us. 'The guy who was house sitting for Darryl had a three day party.'

I relax. Okay, this is about Annie's dad.

'The neighbours complained. We caught them smoking slowboats through Darryl's Kahlua.'

This chick's hundred percent blind to the funny side.

'So Darryl's friend says you'll feed his finches.'

'Annie?'

She nods. 'She says Darryl's paying you.'

Ah, shit. 'When?'

'When they get back.'

'I mean when must I feed them?'

'Oh. Once a day ... and you've got to clean out the cages.'

'Geez.'

I can smell birdshit, just thinking about it. The stink from the Marina picnic park.

'This Darryl guy. He's famous?'

Huge delight in her eyes. 'A TV star.'

She holds out a key. The ring a heart shape in red beads.

I'll vomit on the spot, I swear. I smell it. It's mould and gunpowder and rubbish bins in the sun. Birdcages, I bet, will smell like that. And I must put my hand into thrashing feathers, warm blooded things with fish bone wings. Ag, no, man.

'Can't *you* do it?'

'I'd love to. But I'm not allowed to.' She's genuinely sad she can't help a celeb. She sticks her finger into the bullet hole. Picks out bits of sawdust. 'Eleven of them died from the dope.'

God.

'The fumes.'

Okay, she's talking birds.

'I did what I could yesterday. But they haven't been fed today.'

Little things dying slowly. Wasting away.

I take the key.

'Eleven Cromer Road.'

Bastard police. They look after pet birds, let us get shot.

Eleven birds dead at number eleven.

What a joke. Like there's space for birds in this bursting head.

I tell them through the soldiers' screams on TV, 'Look guys, I'm sleeping in my loft.' Dare Bonita to try interfere.

It's Sharonne who grabs my hand, her eyes big. I shake her off.

'Bullets can only go straight.'

I need to straighten out my brain.

The flat's still full of the shock of the blast. The air's still scared.

I climb the ladder. Get the key. I gobble two Adcodol, lock the last two back in my boot. God, I want more.

That belly place's done it again. The word gifted bangs around in my head. Did you know hope can make you claustrophobic? It's from happiness stuffed down, I think. Tonight gifted fights with turquoise. Both of them tryna win. That turquoise made me furious tonight. Crispy forcing silk on me. Turquoise charity.

I remember, Mom, you walked in while Graham was choosing.

'What are you doing?'

Silk scraps all over the bed.

'How much is this one?'

He held up a turquoise nightie. Small.

'She's too young!'

You tried to grab it. He flicked it away.

'She's old enough. How much?'

You shook your head. Started folding the silk shrapnel, tidying up your stock. The lacy black cat suit with slits up the thighs, Midnight Minx. The red camisole with the red crotchless shorts. Firefly.

He grabbed the list on your dressing table. Took out fifty bucks.

Dropped it on the pile.

You sounded shredded, your voice ripped up.

'Well then, you might as well get one for Angie.'

'Don't be stupid.'

He looked at you like you should be chained up.

'She's too young!'

I gave that blue nightie to Angie when I left home.

I claw through the moonlight. I don't cry. Take the last two. Nothing left. I pull the mattress off the bed. Lie in the line of the bullet. I wish I'd stayed next door. I wish I could see them breathing. See Bonita's bite marks, the lines on her neck as she sleeps.

Princess smiles a sorry smile. She knows the finches are hungry.

Wild thrushes flew past your window, Ma. The light blocked by the rubber tree, wavy arms, pods like swollen finger tips. The thrushes flicked on, flicked off. Never rested.

Inside the dark room, you and your mole.

I hear myself giggle.

You said it was a birthmark, but it was a mole. Thick and raised, and hairs growing in it like soil. Mrs. Mole terrified to leave her hole. Terrified of a creeping disease. But you loved your mole. 'Look.' You held the chocolate against it. 'Same colour.' Graham always got you Whispers from the café. He got us Coke and false fingernails. I was the only one who ever shared his biltong.

You colour matched it. Stroked it. Tweezed out the hairs. You loved your brown mole like you loved dying.

I doze a bit, jerk awake, my heart beating like bats wings. Sweating. Remember the shimmy, how I looked in the mirror, jig-jigging in my jeans. Gifted is bullshit.

I looked like a fool.



Flippin happy riot, Bonita and the girls move back. They see I'm alive, no bullet holes. Plus it's Saturday. Bonita says they have to stay in, but the girls will burst out of there by midday, I can tell. The sun will make steam of Merrick and his gun. The chaos kills me. Sharonne makes a racket with her plastic packets, taking stuff out, rolling them up. She turns the tap on hard, wasting

water. Josie flaps her pants, makes them crack before she puts a leg in. Bonita's still tense, but humming nonstop. Another night with no sleep makes me wanna cry. If I go out, I might pour onto the pavement, dry up in the sun. Become a nothing.

But I make it to 11 Cromer Road. It's across the train tracks, in the village. Wooden gate, wooden door with a stained glass Jesus. This one's all stretched like he's been hanging for too long. There's a crowd of tiny birds in the window. The usual pinch of my sphincter. I stick my face against Jesus's thin chest. There's a long wooden passage right to the back door.

I brace, turn the key. Bird squeaks stick needles in me. The stink of wildlife and dagga. Stale, like matted armpits. I go in. Nudge open the door on the left, where the bird window is. Cause short, shocked screams. I expect bird cages like in a pet shop, but one step in, I hit mesh. From floor to ceiling, I swear. Hot little bodies. Soft feather blades on bicycle spokes.

I scramble back. That whole front room's decorated with birds. Hyped, hungry, must be. Whirring, darting, shaking their tails. But the mesh is tight. They can't reach me.

Hyperactive wings, velvet bellies, twig legs gripping. Amped to eat, to stay alive. The cage fitted with a couple of kite sticks, no leaves or trees. Their tub of water nearly empty. Dirty.

Oh my God. In the lounge, another mesh wall. This cage the size of a flippin Vrygrond house. A hundred finches have got half the lounge, the fireplace too. Feathers piled up, droppings on the mantelpiece, the South Easter whining down the chimney. Outside the cage, a peach coloured couch.

I watch from the door, my stomach knock-knocking all the way to my throat. I check them out. They look like girls. Dolled up, lifting their skirts. Orange throats, hopping. They watch me back, shout loud, no skaam. 'We need to eat! We need to eat!'

I swear, they're everywhere. There's a kitchen through a hatch in the lounge. Through the kitchen window, more finches. This oke's a flippin freak! Part time film star, part time finch freak.

The sun's tryna get in the kitchen window, but the birds block it with their little bodies. Clever enough not to crash into the

glass. I unlatch the back door. My God, it's noisy. As I step out, the finches go ape.

A black panic above me. I jerk back, shut the door to a crack. Peep out. There are starlings nesting on the roof beams.

It's a flippin bird island in the suburb. There are flying geese overhead. Gulls in the garden eating spilt seeds. Flippin gangs of wild birds outside, teasing the finches cause they're not free. The garden's also wild. A red hibiscus goes mad at the drain. Creepers climb up the stoep, up the drainpipe, with thick white blossoms like white rubber gloves. Still folded. I know them. They grew on the wall at the Newlands agency. They're called evening glory, cause they bloom at night. In the day they hide spiders.

I latch the door. Stalk round the other half of the house, expecting more birds. In the bedroom opposite the lounge, a black and white striped duvet. Clothes on hangers, hooked everywhere like someone was battling to decide what to wear. Some camp waist coats. Pleated white shirts. Those funny pants with the baggy crotch and a built in belt. There's a computer in the corner. A huge black hat tied onto it with a ribbon. A white scarf over the chair. I pick it up, sniff it. It's Annie's. The one I wore to the races. White as an angel's wing, smells like oranges and pepper. On the walls, blown up photos. The same man, getting older. Black hair in some photos, then a bit grey. Always brushed to the side. Pock marks. Him with daring girls, you know, chancers. Beads. Boots. Bare legs to the bum. Pretty little things, like finches. None of Annie, but what's the bet this oke's collected her. She's a bright little bird, like the others. Naughty, hyped. A new one to flit around his film set.

I missed a room. Back down the passage, near the front door. It's piled high with old newspapers. Years old, must be, cause there's a huge headline that says Two Days To War. A big black bin full of sunflower seeds. Bags and bags of unpopped popcorn. Some plastic tubs. It's like a flippin farmer's barn in here.

I can't do this. I'm shit scared they're gonna hit me, hack holes. Whack their warmth against me. Cling to me, try to get in.

I can't go into the cage.
But if I don't they'll get thin. Dry out.
Die a slow death, one hour at a time.
I've gotto grow up and do it, Ma. Forget what you said.

It was when you were up, selling Sensual Secrets.
'Tess.'
I ran into the circle of your arm.
'Tess, I want to tell you.'
'Yes, Ma?' I gripped onto your leg. I wanted you to stay.
'You see those birds there at the rubber tree?'
'The thrushes?'
'Ja.'
'They're gonna fly into you if you don't stop wetting your broeks.'
I thought you meant they'd whack into me. 'They won't.'
'They can.'
'I'll duck.'
'No man, they'll fly into your fanny.'
I watched the thrushes flick their tails. Nip grass from their nests.
'Uh-uh. How will they get in?' Scoffing.
'You need to hold your hole closed. Hold it tight. And baby ...'
You called me baby. Made me wanna climb on your lap, cling on. 'I don't want that to happen to you.'
Your face was sad, for real. You were serious.
I clutched my fanny with my hands. Crossed my legs. Practised pinching my muscles. 'It's okay, Mom. They'll never get in.'

Later me and Dumi were tickling circles round the edges of the tok-tokkie holes. Some birds flew over us. I rammed my legs together, straight as sticks. Shut the opening.
Dumi asked, 'What are you doing?'
'Mom says the birds can fly inside me.'
Dumi killed himself laughing. 'She's telling you lies.'
I kicked him. Bloody hard on the bum, knocking him over.
Why would my own mother come out in the sun, call me specially to tell me a lie?

I fill a plastic tub with water. Hold up the seed bin lid as a shield. I take a big breath, hold it. 'Grow up, grow up,' I say in my head. Half shut my eyes. Run in. Scream. Dump the water, splash my toes.

Run back, slam the cage door.

Run for the toilet. Pee.

Good girl.

I run in again, a tub full of seeds. This time they fly for me. Oh, shit. Some get behind my shield. Hit my back, my arms. My nightmare. One whacks my hair, one whips my neck. Birds hit me like flippin memories, but I pour the seeds. Get the hell out. Run back to the feed room. Get more. Run to the next cage. Keep running, in case I stop.

When they're all fed, it's weird, I'm smiling for the first time in how long. Panting crazy, the tips of my fingers tingling.

One more job, I've gotto sort out the smell. This'll take a bit longer.

I get a whole lot of newspaper. Put on one of Darryl's pleated white shirts. Untie the black hat. Let them try dig into my head. I keep my eyes a bit shut, so I see more lashes than flitting birds wings. Keep my muscles tight. This time they just smack the air around me, don't actually touch me. I keep my back to the mesh. It's not that I think they'll fly in. I'm not a kid anymore. But still.

Ag, I'm killer. I crack the whole thing. Lay all the cages with warnings of war. Okay, I get dizzy from holding my breath, but when I chuck myself back into the seed room, something proud breaks free in me. I just ran into flock after flippin flock, got whacked, got whipped. No birds even broke my skin. I feel like a flippin hero.

Flippin gifted.

It happens when I relax. When I'm happy like that, that's when I remember the turquoise.

I'm on the window sill, in turquoise silk. Swinging on the burglar bars. The sun makes me transparent, an insect wing. The nightie's called 'Lounge Lizard.' Graham bought it for me. Thin, lacy straps. Slits all the way to the waist. The turquoise of False Bay in summer. He's grabbing for me, a ring inside a ring inside a ring inside his eyes. 'Tess, someone'll see you.'
'But you can see me.'
'I'm allowed to.'
He pulls me down and tickles me, makes me giggle.
'Sssh, not so loud. Your mom is sick.'
He slips his hands into the Lounge Lizard slits.
'I'm allowed to. I'm allowed to, hey Tess?'

My heart is swollen like it's taken in water. Pumping tons.
I'm mad, I'm mad, making stuff up. Making disgusting pictures cause I'm coming off pills. Hallucinations, must be.
I whisper, there on the old news of the world, 'Help me, help me, help me.'
I don't know how long I sit there, I swear. Long enough to see the deadline's the same as the tadpole's. Two days to war. Two days to suction.
In forty eight hours she'll be sucked away.
Tomorrow's her last day.

I try lying on Darryl's black and white bed.
'I'm allowed to, hey Tess?'
Shame burns me white hot.
I roll onto my stomach, make the sound of a beast, left behind by the others.
Pain brought to me by flippin belly. Thank you.
I need peace from this pain. I'll die without it.

The sun's sunk behind the mountain. I run, catch a new, chilly wind. Get in before closing. Slip past the till girl reading the Echo. At the dispensary, a hand holding the phone's all that shows. I can't pull off a lie right now, so I just stick my arm over where they keep the pain pills. Geez, I'm in luck. The Syndol's the closest. The till girl's too surprised to even think. I dump the

money before a white coat pops up. Twenty five bucks. Don't wait for the change.

I'm on the road next to the railway when I hear someone sing, 'Miss Peterson! Miss Peterson!' It's Sybil, her yellow curls like in an old photo. Hobbling high speed on her bandaged ankle. A train pounds past. The carriages run a broken line of light along a wall, along her pale face. The Syndol's a bulge in my top pocket.

Sybil laughs at herself, peaches on her cheeks from her hurry. She points at her ankle. 'I fell over my mother-in-law's dog.'

If she says anything about the pills, I'll say it's better than being married to a lazy sod. That's all I know about her.

She loses her laugh, touches my sleeve. 'Miss Peterson, I just wanted to give you some medical information.'

I'm waiting for a speech about addiction and liver damage and all the stuff on the paper in the box, when she says, 'Even lower scheduled anesthetics can be very damaging to a baby in the womb. Syndol, Propain, Adcodol, Lenadol. They're all the same. If you take too many, the codeine can damage the foetal heart.'

Blood pumps up from my heart to my ears. She saw me try swipe that pregnancy test.

'It can also cause breathing defects, bone defects ...'

I see that Sybil doesn't have kids. I see it in the way her voice goes deep and her eyes look inside, like she's fetching the words from her own empty womb. 'It won't be able to grow properly.'

Madeleine and her lost daughter in Congo. Now Sybil from the chemist, fired up for my child.

I swear, they look at me and they see a baby.

It's like this kid's alive.

Two on my tongue. Three on my tongue. Shit.

The codeine can damage the foetal heart.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I chuck the box in the lounge cage. It lands against the mesh, near the water bowl. You'd think it's a snake, the flippin screaming fit. But now at least, I've got to think twice.



I leave my pills in the cage. While I'm waiting for Monday, I get back to work. Do what I know. My heart is raw but I get back to work with a fat gangster.

I wave him down on his motor bike. Tell him I've got a room. I chuck the Syns, but I make more risk. Don't ask me why.

I get on the back. I think he stole the bike cause he rides it rough. Misses the gears, drops the throttle. I pinch the sides of his jacket. Watch the fat fold on the back of his neck. He takes the back roads. Walks the bike over the footbridge at the vlei. I force myself to chit chat. 'So what do you do?'

'I'm a fitter.'

But I can see he's a gangster. Bulbs of gold on his fingers.

'What do you fit, gold rings?'

'That's right,' in this flat aggro voice that says don't ask again.

'Hey, wait.'

There next to the vlei, I break off a thin Port Jackson branch.

'I've got birds at home.'

He whips out this flippin mean flick knife. Slices three whippy green sticks. But I'm not scared of his blade. Not today.

'Leave some leaves,' I tell him.

The finches shriek. Shoot up. Land. Hit the mesh with their wing tips, make feathers fall. There's still a strong bird stink. Before we do it, I ask him to hook the sticks on the mesh. There, in the corners. The birds freak out, but he does it quick-quick, cause he's keen.

I must have had a death wish. The oke wants to go on top.

I say, 'No, you lie back.'

'You think I'm too fat.'

I squeeze his huge arms. 'Ag, no, I'm sure you can hold yourself up.'

But I'm not sure. He takes it as a challenge. I lie on the couch, spread my legs. The finches whistle as he lands. I think I'm dead, my back's gonna snap, but he lifts himself up. Giant hands next to my head. His arms start to wobble. He's gonna topple. I buck to hurry him up, pray his scaffolding won't break. If he falls I'll die. He'll leave me there to stink with the finches.

He blows air, 'Whooooo.' Sags onto me. God, he's gonna crush me after the flippin fact, but he rolls onto the floor. The birds flare up. Chatter and babble about it all. 'Serious-ly, serious-ly. Did you see?'

He rustles paper money. Two fifties. His arms tremble on his bike.

'See you, girl.'

His sweetness a surprise. Maybe, for a split second, he loves me.

Like Graham did.

The thought zaps me like lightning.

I clean up, go back to the road.

Limp Lennie picks me up. Now what does he want? I'm thinking he must have firmed up by now, he's had long enough.

Back to the stables, the grooms nowhere today. Like that first time, I'm waiting for him to take me into his straw house, undo his buckle. But no, he still wants me to understand him. He wants us to stand with the sun hard boiling our heads. He wants me to meet the mad, red horse. Shines like oil. Redder than rust. Says its name is Pienkie. He gets defensive when I laugh. 'I didn't give her that name.' He tells me the police keep it alone cause it bites holes in the others. 'But she's my favourite.'

'Why?'

He shrugs. 'I don't know. I'm kak scared of horses.'

'What?'

'My father was a groom at Randy Wilson's racing stables.'

The horse rams the hay with its nose, twitches the flies off its skin. Looks straight at Lennie, flippin mechanical jaw grinds the straw into nothing. 'He forced me to ride.' Lennie ducks

under the gum pole. All fluttery, he strokes the horse along its neck, down its shining spine.

'Aren't you scared it's gonna bite you?'

'Yes.' He keeps it sweet, charms the horse. 'Like I said, I'm kak scared of horses.' He strokes, like he's finding new muscles, new lines. It stamps suddenly, swings back, rasps at its flank with flippin gigantic teeth. For a split second, Lennie goes slack, like someone just pulled the cord out.

When the horse eats again, he says softly, 'When I was three he put me on race horses. Some were nearly eighteen hands high. He held me on and ran with the horse in the ring. I slipped off, but he grabbed my ankle and pulled me back up. He wanted to teach me. I was the first born.'

I know by now I'm here to listen.

'Later he used the whip. He made me ride alone.'

Hardly ever happens on the road, but I know the deal from agency days. All I have to do is say, So? and, Oh?

'Thoroughbreds on protein food.'

'So?'

'Protein hypes them up.'

'Oh.'

Lennie stands right behind the horse now, perfect place to be kicked to death. He runs his hands down its legs, to the ground.

'He put me on this one stallion. It threw itself onto its back.'

The horse swings its head back to him, nudges him hard with its nose.

'I had internal bleeding.'

The horse carries on destroying the straw. 'But I never broke a single bone.' Lennie's eyes shine as he boasts, 'I never, ever broke a bone.'

This from a man whose sperm all have broken necks.

'Oh?'

He goes on about his bad fall.

'I was two weeks in hospital. My father came to see me. He told me, When you are right, you are getting straight back on!'

Lennie ducks out of there. The chestnut beast runs along the gum poles, sends up a siren, a flippin song of longing. Shit, like it's homesick.

Lennie also looks lost. 'They're going to shoot her.'

I look around, 'Who?'

'The cops. She attacks anyone who tries to ride her. She bit off two of the captain's fingers.' He draws a line under his last two fingers. 'Here.'

'They're gonna kill her for that?'

He nods. 'They're waiting for the papers from somewhere.'

The horse grinds at the gum pole with curved, yellow fangs. Lifts off a strip, careful, like a carpenter. Whinnies again. She listens, her head way up. Pure muscle makes a snake shape in her neck.

'And now they keep her alone, she's also got harregat with the other horses.'

'Right off?'

He nods. 'They said he was only bridling her up in a hurry. That time when those boys robbed that German ambassador on the beach.'

'I heard. They stabbed him in the eye.'

'The whole police team had to look through the dunes.'

The restless red horse sends up sand, frets along the poles.

I speak for her, 'She wasn't in the mood.'

He nods. 'Someone must have hurt her, some time.'

I shift down the gum pole, out of reach of the beast that bites off fingers. Rest my own worried bones on the fence. Shit, I need Coke. I shade my eyes from the sun, keep a watch on that horse through a mash of lashes. Lennie talks more. Seems like his dad and his brother bullied him.

'My brother's a champion wrestler. He used me for practice, him and his wrestling maats. I just went loose until they got bored of me.' He boasts again, 'I never broke a single bone.'

Pienkie paces. Trots round her cell, glares at the horses in the distance. Neighs for forgiveness or war, I dunno.

Lennie gives me this whole story how his mom used to make soft dolls for the Coon Carnival. Pinstripe pants. Afro hair.

'When my brother was rough I went loose like those dolls. Like I was stuffed with lappies.'

I see him flying around, arms and legs at bad angles.

A smile loosens his face, his eyes catch the sun. 'I carved little banjos for those dolls.' His smile scuttles back into his jaw. Funny guy. Too sensitive. God only knows how he ever managed to be stiff. Ever.

Lennie goes on about when he was a kid, I say, Oh and, So.

But it makes me remember. I've never been on a real horse, but we used to pretend. We galloped them wild on the gravel heap. We were like, seven or eight. Way before Kerry's horse with the tick bum.

After that time with the ticks in my bikini, Kerry's mother made her ask me to play. We were up on her garage roof, rolling the ball of a deodorant bottle. Her white cart horse stood below, crunching the spines of some napier leaves. He whipped his head up just like Pienkie. Like he was tryna make out like he was highly strung.

'My hymen's already broken,' said Kerry.

'What's a hymen?'

'It's a piece of skin that goes over your fanny. Like on a drum.'

'But what about your wee?'

'No, man. *That* pipe comes out somewhere else. It's a piece of skin. Virgins have it. But only virgins who don't ride.'

She sent me the Shield for Sportsmen roller ball before I was ready. It spun out of the gutter. I chased it, hung off the asbestos edge, let my toes slide down the whitewashed wall. My chin was stuck above the gutter, my face all red from hanging like that. She said, 'Your husband has to break it, otherwise he can't get in.'

I worried, I fretted, I freaked out inside. Same day I came up with an answer. Marriage is out.

'Lennie I've gotto go.'

Lennie climbs back through the poles, gives the horse a last stroke down the bone of its nose.

'Do you want to come with me tonight to watch wrestling?'

Geez.

'My brother's a champion.'

'Will you pay me for my time?'

Lennie's eyes drop to the pounded sand. Cheapskate.

But it's me who feels cheap. 'Ag, okay, if it's at night. I don't work at night. But if you wanna try again, you pay.'

He smiles at me with the same eyes he has for that psycho horse.

Fond, like a proper father's.

Late that Saturday, I check out the Syndol. I crave it. I hate it.

I wanna smash it, flush it. Gobble it up. I dunno how to say it.

The craving, it rips me inside out.

I try think of the bird flapping frenzy.

One more day. The tadpole doesn't deserve to be hurt. It's swimming there thinking it's got half a chance. But life's too much of a bloody business, and if it's a girl, it's not worth it.

I find tuna in the cupboard. Eat it straight.

This kid loves fish.

The garden gate slams. Something crashing, something on wheels. The birds go berserk. Outside the front door, a woman's voice, 'Darryl's in Joburg. He's doing a TV show.'

A man's voice answers.

Shit. I'm in a dress with tassels. My takkies too casual. What to wear? What to wear? Darryl's got little feet. I try on a shiny black boot. A bit big, a bit blunt in the front. I lift a leg to get a squiz in the mirror. A cowgirl craving flippin painkillers. Waiting for Monday.

The man's voice, reasoning.

The woman goes, 'It is number eleven, but it's locked up. Look.'

I stick my head in the passage. The front door springs open, hits the passage wall. Crispy Nora nearly falls in. A white haired kid wheelies the stairs on a black plastic bike. Lennie looks like he's hit gold. 'Tess!'

Lennie's hair's waxed back. Baggy black pants. Shirt buttoned up to the neck. Crispy tries to apologise, 'I didn't know ...'

'We're going to watch my brother. He's a springbok wrestler.' Helluva proud. Not one bit ashamed to pick up a prostitute.

His little Mini's outside. A blast of aftershave makes me suspicious. I'm not in the mood for private parts.

Crispy waves us off over her wall. Two blonde heads at each shoulder, same as those round christmas flowers in her garden.

The Good Hope Centre's the shape of a big fat worm. Inside, Lennie buys me an extra large Coke. Our seats are miles from the ring. Lennie says his brother's a proper Springbok, but he trained for six months to do wrestling for show. 'He had to learn how to fall.' Lennie laughs, a big, glad laugh but then bites it in half. Shows me a man in front, 'That ou with the red shirt. That's my father.' Big guy, sloping shoulders, waving at someone in the tunnel. From the side, the same face as Lennie. But this guy's got beef. 'You've got your dad's face.'

'Sssh.' Like he might hear.

The guy's beef gives him a boxer bouncer look. Maybe he shoved horses back with his shoulder, onto the starting block. He sits for one second, rises up with the crowd, lifts his fists as the fighters come in. The announcer shouts, 'Damon the Demon! Steve the Serpent!'

'Steve Masinga,' Lennie shouts into my ear.

Lennie's dad goes to meet the beast with the lighter skin. Puts a hand on his neck. Sees his kid into the ring. A hard, loving shove.

They've got those dumb names, but they're not all dressed up and painted like on WWF. Damon's got a shaved head, his mother's face, must be. His jaw too far forward. His forehead wide. The same buttery brown as Lennie and his dad. From here he looks slick, a steam bath kind of man, you know, sparkling on fruit and chicken fillet. Muscles so tight against his skin, looks like there's no blood in him. He's more of a sculpture than a ripping, street fighting thing. But I flatter Lennie. 'He's a flippin rock.'

Steve Masinga's just as big. They say on the speakers he's from Pretoria. Same as the skinny policeman, can you believe. But this guy's got the wrong name. He's not a snake, he's a tree, torn out the flippin earth. A whole lot of stump to his arms and legs, hands bigger than his head. Lennie ducks suddenly. His dad's scanning the crowd. Lifts a thumb at someone. 'Damon's sponsor,' Lennie says.

Shit this is not the wrestling you see on TV. Not those action men, peroxide hair, black diamonds painted on their eyes. Rubber g-strings, bouncing off each other. No way. These two collide black and blue. Their bodies crash like flippin cars. They shatter, need real fixing. They get bad rope burn from slicing into the ropes. Elbow blows make horrible swellings. Sheez, I can smell blood. My stomach's in a ball, my heart's gone pale. Lennie shrinks, goes still. Shoulders bent over his ribs. Arms folded across his stomach, a flippin wet rag on the plastic seat. Lennie's dad's head strains like it's being held back by a strap, grinding flippin enamel. Steve does good tricks, gets Damon down for long seconds. He makes Damon suffer, sweat so much Lennie's dad flaps his hands at the sponsor. Draws a stripe across his forehead. The sponsor fusses in a bag, pulls out a red sweat band. Next break they slip it onto Damon's head. It's got big letters on it.

'Eternity,' says Lennie.

'Huh?'

'Life Insurance.'

Round five, Lennie's dad shouts through a crack in the crowd, 'Beat him boy!' Nicely timed during a messy shuffle. Damon the Demon gets amped, hurls himself at big Steve. Hurtles against him, again and again. They're a creature with four limbs, falling so hard there must be blood. I suck on my Coke, push the fluids. Next to me, Lennie's legs hang loose, his arms flop like they're sewn on.

'Finish him boy!' Again, that roar fills a space. Damon gets furious, gets on top. Steve's hands and feet are like clubs, whacking the ground. Dying for air, death drums, I swear. The

crowd count out loud. '... eight ... nine ... ten!' Damon flies up, his arms in the air. The crowd goes crazy. Lennie waits for his dad and his brother to go down the tunnel. His dad's hand back on Damon's neck. Herding the fighting beast home.

It's cold in the parking lot.

'Your boet is mean.' But Lennie's suddenly lost all his pride.

I change my tune. 'But what a stupid sport, hey?'

The insult gets a smile out of him.

I dunno why, but it pisses me off, the way he changes. The way he's jealous and proud at the same time. I mean, what is he?

We get into the Mini.

I dunno why, but I wanna needle him. Make him face things.

'What happened to you in there, hey?'

The bottom half of people pass by. Belts, skirts, belly buttons. Tucked in shirts and silver zips. 'You went all floppy, like a flippin stroke.' I laugh ugly. 'And why do you duck and dive your dad?'

I've got him in a knot, but his silence makes me push even harder.

'Why don't you go and see your brother?' I dunno why I'm so cross. 'Aren't you talking to them?'

'I stay away from them.'

'What, except Saturday night?'

'I don't know why I come and watch. I hate violence.'

A cigarette end burns like a jewel on the tar. I wanna kill him with words, that's what. 'The same reason you carve horses. You're like, stuck in the past. Cause why do you carve them, over and over? If you're so scared of horses, why are you so obsessed?'

Lennie winds his arms round the steering wheel. Rests his chin there. He sighs like I've bust him, big time. Like he gives up. But he comes back with a flippin surprise. 'Why are you so obsessed with sex?'

'Stuff you!'

A flash of turquoise.

'I'm not. I ...'

The sun shines through my nightie.
Cars rev off the tar, hit what's left of Saturday night.
'I left school in standard eight.'
'Ja, but ...' He leaves it like that.
Starts the car.

'Why are you so obsessed with sex?'
His question in my head. Stuff him.
I battle to sleep in Darryl's bed. It smells like oil glands. Man's skin. I keep seeing the Syndol box, tickled by feathers. Feathers floating in the water bowl. My Disney stickers on the mirror. Donald Duck with his tipping up tail. The sticker curled it's so old.

A little boy shit scared of horses. A grown man who can't stop carving.
A little girl who wet her broeks. A grown up whore.

Lennie's like me. He learned to stay on. But it's men that I ride.
I shut my eyes tight to stop the flood, but my tears are just a terrible mirror.

My dressing table mirror. Donald Duck with his tipping up tail. Graham's big brown hands working in circles. Round and round where my little breasts grow, his curly head bent to the glass. His sandpaper face, scratching my neck, biting off my head, it looks like. Mommy.

I stumble into the lounge, hit the light switch. The Syndol's still there. Real. Solid. I'm sick from seeing imaginary things. My brain's slippery without my big five, it's sliding around, mixing real life with flippin dreams. It was better when it just got chockablock and I took the pills to empty it out. I'm sick for Syndol. Sick, sick, sick.
My blood's screaming for what's in the box.

But I don't go into the cage. I stay out for the tadpole.
Watch the finches' eyes.
Is it true? I ask.

Is it true?

Their eyes are soft, curious. That's all. They steady my mind that's slipping, ducking, scaring the shit out of me.

Stuff Lennie.

'Why are you so obsessed with sex?'

I watch their eyes. And I flippin go looking. I go looking for truth.

The headmistress phoned.

You took me to Doctor Le Grange.

He had bushy eyebrows like Lady's tail. When he opened my legs I whimpered. He warmed his tools in a bowl of hot water. Kept saying, 'I have to have a quick look.'

I knew he'd see my black heart there, in my fanny. Don't tell Mommy.

But he only had doctor's words for you. 'I can't see anything wrong with her sphincter. But her vaginal opening is unnaturally large.'

Your red, red blouse spread up your neck, up, up from its little lace collar. You wore it that day with your nice, white slacks.

On the way home it drained back again. But your jaw was stiff like you had lockjaw. You jerked up the handbrake in the driveway. Sat staring at the garage door.

'Mommy?'

You started laughing, a weird sound. Then you made big eyebrows with your fingers. Pulled scary eyes, 'Doctor Deranged.'

I didn't get it.

'Deranged means crazy. See? Doctor Le Grange. Doctor Deranged.'

Then I laughed till I wanted to pee. And you gave me a whole box of Whispers from your old stock, from the time when you were still dying.

The school phoned again.

You said, 'No, the doctor doesn't know. Yes, we'll make sure she packs a clean pair.'

Graham asked, 'A clean pair of what?'
'Panties. In her school bag.'

I know now.
It's true.
It's true and you knew.

I hang onto the mesh. Crouch in their soft eyes. The finches chirp, 'It's true-and you knew. It's true-and you knew.'

I tried to tell you, Ma.
How many times did I come to you, sit on the end of your bed?
Ask you what's naughty, what's not.
'Lady's naughty, Mom, to make sex with Bruno.'
The old man down the road with the spiral toenails, his dog was called Bruno. That staffie cross thing of dumb muscle. Bruno got stuck to Lady. I cried and cried, what else can you do when your dog is stuck to another?
'Is Lady naughty Mom?'
You stroked your precious birthmark. Got a faraway look in your eyes like you were hypnotised.
'Mmm.'
'It's naughty, Mom, to touch other people. It's naughty Mom, to touch their privates.'
You knew, Mom. Born clean, but you watched me get dirty, get stretched. Leaking, soaking up Graham's appetite. His fumbling, his thrusting. Soaking it up for you.
When the doctor told you the truth, you made him into a stupid monster, like the ones in your horror novels.

I want to call. I want to kill.
I want to say, 'I know, I know, I know that you knew.'

I go sit in a knot on the peach couch.
You watched me just like you'd watch me now, dying slowly.
My stomach's heavy, like the tadpole's been sunk. I swear my heart is bleeding.

You watched me leave home. Move in with men. I came back for visits, sat on your bed. Told you I was seeing Dave, the radio DJ. Twenty years older, staying in his flat.

Later I told you about Warren the bouncer, how he sold photos of me.

I begged for you then. Begged you to say I was bad. To say, 'Stop this nonsense. Come home, clean yourself up'. Hit me with your slop.

But you sipped your cold tea. Looked over your cup at the painting of storming Zulus. Gazed at it like it was the sea.

I keep the light bright. When the birds go to sleep, I keep my eyes on the tiny flames on their chests. That warm spot keeps me alive, keeps me dry. Keeps my heart beating, just, just. I don't go in the cage. I leave the pills to rot. I have nothing to hide. No reason to try.



Sunday's a grey day. I'm surprised I'm alive.

Funny, what gets me up. It's the tadpole, my mission to give it a painless death.

I make my legs walk, go fetch stuff from the flat. On the way past the park, I spot Muffy, the bergie, doing a public pee. A laugh comes up from deep, shocks me. Man, that Muffy's religious. The way she faces the cars, squats like she's gonna give birth to a flippin messiah. Pees out poes wine.

Bonita and the girls found my box of kimonos. All three of them are covered in tiny blue jets. Princess's got a fishing sinker hanging on her finger, a hairbrush balanced on her head. Loud politics on the radio, no one listening. Going on about the three year anniversary of the start of the Iraqi war. They've found a memo now, they say, that proves Bush and Blair knew there were no bad nuclear weapons, but Bush said let's just invade anyway.

My trunk is open. A pile of soggy brown cores on the counter. Bonita's cutting ugly bits from old apples.

Bonita's dying to ask me where I was. Tries to suss me out with her eyes. I just shrug.

Little shits have found Lennie's wooden horse. Josie's trotting it on the balcony floor. She's made a saddle out of putty or something. A bridle with a string. A ring of beads around each hoof. 'Shik, shik, shik' go the beads with each bump. She's found my spare soaps, still in their wrappers. Jumps the horse over them. 'Good girl,' strokes its nose.

Bush and Blair had a chat about how to start the war. Bush said maybe we should kill Saddam Hussein. Or maybe just shoot down a UN plane.

Geez, the truth's coming out everywhere.

Sharonne's up in my loft. She's made one of those paper puzzles you put on your fingers. She leans down. 'Choose a number, Tess. Under ten.'

Ag, whatever.

'Nine.'

Josie looks up when she hears my voice. The guilt trickles oh so slowly. She glances at my trunk, tries some big eyes.

'On my life I won't touch the other stuff. But can I play with the horse?'

A bit too late to bloody ask.

'Tess!'

'What?'

'Choose a colour.'

'Blue.'

The stuff in my trunk's all in a jumble. I know exactly what's in there. Rainbow socks with separate toes. From Auntie Cindy. Only seen her twice in my life.

The poster from the Scratch Patch with all the stones on it.

A poetry book I kept when I dropped out of school. Half of it I didn't get cause I didn't have a teacher to explain. The last bit, the modern stuff I could work out. E. E Cummings and the small hands and the rain.

Some old school reports in case I ever got a job in Cape Town.

More fluffy toys I never sent to Angie's kids.
A helluva cheap watch I won at the Seven Eleven. You know,
from the machine.
A wire crocodile I bought from a pisscat at the robots.
Some photos. I shut the trunk on Angie on the number one box
for freestyle. Shoulders blocking the whole sky. Giggling at me
aiming her friend's camera. Angie begged me to go watch her
that day. Swore if I went, she would win.

Sharonne's as happy as flippin cupid, 'You will marry your first
boyfriend!'
That's a bit difficult. My mom's already married to him.

I start packing a bag.
Bonita watches, tries to get all detective. 'Where'd you get that
horse, Tess?'
'Some oke, mad artist. Fighting with his wife.'
'He's a marvel, man. Is he famous?'
'Uh-uh. Works at Goliath Shocks.'
'Junne.'
I tell Josie, 'You can play with the horse, but keep this shut,
okay?'
Josie stands up, nods like a good girl. Bonita says, 'Josie, keep
your head down, man!' Josie drops back onto her bum, safe
from sniper fire. Canters the horse in impossible circles.

Madeleine spots me over the balcony wall. A few seconds later,
she runs in the door. Searchlights my eyes. 'Can you come and
sew?'
I watch the velvet skin at her throat. 'Uh-uh. I can't. I've got to
house sit. It's a job.'
'What about the bras?'
'You know who'll be good? Is Sharonne.'
Bonita backs me up, 'Sharonne's excellent.'
Stupid jealousy punctures me. 'See, you don't need me.'
'We need you.' Her brown, burnt eyes still tryna spy a way into
mine.

On the radio, they go, '... six hundred and fifty thousand people have died violent deaths as a result of the invasion.'
Josie comes to watch me pack. 'Where are you going, Tess?'
'Ag, just to Muizenberg. This guy's got hundreds of birds and he needs me to feed them.'
Wish I'd shut up cause Josie's all stoked, 'Ah, can I come and see them? Can I come and help?'
Bonita listening hard. I wish they'd all bugger off.
'No, man. I'm in and out.' I say to Bonita. 'I'm gonna work nights.'
'Why? I'm helping you with the rent.'
'I wanna milk the last bit of summer.'
Actually, I wanna die.

I say before I go, 'The horse's name is Pienkie.' Josie shakes her head, 'Oh no. Hurricane.' Sails the horse through the air.
I don't tell her Hurricane bites.
As I go out the door, she nags, 'Please can I come see the birds?'
Madeleine's cheeky, teasing me, 'Yes, please can we come?'
Those two make my throat go lame. I say, 'Okay,' down the stairs, but I've got no volume.

It's flippin drizzling. And it's only April.
I get stuck in the finch house that Sunday. I couldn't care less. Even though I'll bleed for a while and I'll be flat bloody broke. Bonita says she'll help, but she's too paranoid to leave the flat. I know I need to go out, get a jump. But I couldn't care less. I'm like Helen of the desert, hiding away. She had owls, I've got finches. Only difference is, cement owls don't shit.
On Darryl's TV, some kind of show where they've got dance and drama students staying in a house. A dreadlocked ballet dancer's going to bed. No shirt, white long johns. Pulls back his duvet. A groan from somewhere in the room. The white guy's noticed the boy's six pack and he's sick with jealousy. He tries to tense his stomach, tries to get some shape. Dreadlocks just laughs at him, ripples. Lying there I tense my first muscle, tighten the sling. It's true.

Number two, the band between the bones.
And you knew.
Number three to the solar plexus.
That's why you didn't ask.

I get up, change the channel. A black guy talking to a woman with big ears. I'm watching her sharp ears sticking through her hair and she's saying, 'What's different about this initiative?'

It's one of those sparky interviews where they try make boring stuff sound all hip. There's a laugh in the man's eyes. Naughty like he's noticed her ears. But he's talking seriously, that musical English with the African beat. The guy, I recognise. Maybe from the agency. Maybe a client from the houses of parliament. But he's not a politician.

He says, 'Politicians tend to get caught up in the applause. They admit it themselves.'

'Really?'

'Yes.' He grins. 'Only when there are no microphones.' But he says, if the politicians try break their promise, his organisation charges them interest. 'And if you think about it, interest is the right word.' He laughs now, a genuine, happy laugh.

Elf Ears says something like, 'And you say this is backed up by an international court?'

'Yes,' he says. 'They monitor who is on track and who is failing. They pressurise the foreign affairs ministries to honour their debt.'

Elf Ears asks, 'So how well does all this go down with the Big Five?'

He chuckles. I swear in that little laugh I recognise Dumi.

The same voice on the radio.

My God. It's my Dumi.

'They will get it, in time.' He scribbles with a finger in the palm of his hand. 'We rely on their signatures for now.' He laughs again.

I stare. Dumi taming politicians. Holding signatures in his hand like his imaginary falcons. I half listen as he goes on about Africa being the womb of humankind and how its riches have made

the rest of the world fat. How the world must give back to itself to support its weaker parts.

Dumi gets a faraway look, a look I remember from when he was wondering about whether the snails would feel pain, or why the beetles only came to me. 'It's funny how people still think in parts. It's the root of all hypocrisy.' He says, 'In countries *and* individuals. For instance, I could be this person who does all the right things. I could use solar power in my house, I could give the car attendant a good tip. But I could have a family member, say my mother, dying in a back room. And when she cries, I turn the music up.' Then he says, 'Honestly, I knew this man who had his buttons polished every day with Brasso, to look smart for work. But at home he sexually abused his daughter ...'

A wave of blood breaks on my eardrums. Makes me deaf. I'm looking at him looking at Elf Ears and he's talking about me. Did it happen? Did he say that? The sound comes back. Something about a big conference next year in Egypt, the first feedback or something, and then she thanks him. She says, 'Thank you, Dumisani.'

I swear.

Dumi is on his hands and knees, being the mom. Waiting his turn to be the dad. Pretending to polish the floor. Shouting to the dolls, 'Get a plate. Don't mess your bread.'

I'm pretending to pee like a horse. I shake my imaginary dinges. Then rub, rub, rub it like Graham. Shudder. Groan. Roll my eyes.

Dumi gets a wondering look. 'Why do you do that?'

'That's what fathers do.'

He doesn't believe me. What does he know, his dad went to work in Prospecton where the air is sick and stinky. He got a girlfriend and didn't come back. And Dumi lives in a hut in the sugar cane hills with only a bucket of water and Sunlight soap. No bathroom, like me. Or a father to come in and pee.

'It's what white fathers do,' I say to convince him.

Shit.

I do remember why Graham banned Dumi. It was later. We were bigger. I took Dumi to Graham's wardrobe. Showed him the mag on the top of the pile. His eyes nearly fell out his head. 'Cha!' He had a bloody good look at some chick's fanny before he chucked it back. Shut the wardrobe. 'It's not for children.' I got all confused, flippin cross. I pushed him away, pulled at the handle. 'Man, it's fine, he lets me see them.' He let go from shock. 'That's not right.' Then he shoved the door again, leaned against it. Squeezed me out, got my hair stuck in the door. 'Eina!' 'Sorry, sorry.' He guarded the door. A big twelve year old. 'That's not right.'

I hit Graham in the face. It wasn't on purpose. I was dead asleep, tryna hit a hockey ball. I didn't ever play sport at school, but I was going for a goal. Hockey girls coming at me. I smacked at the ball, but my stick went right through it, like the ball was a ghost. I swung again. Whack! I got it. Light burst in my face. Graham was crawling, hanging onto his nose. Whispering, 'Jesus fucking Christ.' I started giggling, I couldn't help it. Till I saw the Hustler dropped on the floor. It was time for *that*. Time for his hands in the night. Time to get out of my body, leave a raw chicken for Graham to stroke and to stuff, like Gladys did, garlic under the skin, take out the insides. Mash them with bread and stuff it full, full, so the bones even stretch. I swallowed my crying, but this time I said, 'Dumi says these are not for children. Dumi says it's not right.'

So Graham got rid of Dumi and made Gladys scared. Her face was stiff the day she said Dumi's gone. Stiff like those carvings for tourists, like they're also shit scared to lose their jobs. Before that, she was noisy, pissed off. 'Whoo. Umlungu!' which means, Whoo. Whities! Gladys shook her dark head. 'Cha,' she clucked, bunched up my sheets. Dragged my mattress into the sun. When I was six, seven, eight, nine, ten. Semen, blood, wee. All those years Gladys must have

known. She vacuumed Lady's hair off the couch. Washed the supper dishes, quiet like a burglar because the clunking bugged Graham. Swept the beach sand me and Angie brought home in the gusset of our costumes. The round part of her pointing finger rubbing Graham's buttons with Brasso.

'Hayikhona!' She dropped the mattress on the grass. 'Umlungu omubi.' Evil whittie. More angry Zulu sounds, curses for sure. Maybe it was Gladys, not me, who struck Graham down.



I watch TV for a day and a night. Watch everything under the sun. I can't remember what I watch after Dumi, but I watch till I crash. Wake up Monday before it's even light. Thank God I didn't dream.

I eat tuna again instead of Syndol. This is the day. Abort. Take some peace pills. Not as many as before cause I don't wanna get addicted.

I'll have to do one more jump. One more for cash, on the way. I find Darryl's iron. My red dress doesn't need much. Flippin thing's tighter than it used to be. Iron my panties. Tssh. Now I know why. A dirty girl tryna burn clean.

It's a cruel, clear morning. The traffic's full of depressed people. Picking, yawning. They see me, don't believe me. It's too early for sex. But not for one oke. A driver for Battery Man. A funny little bakkie, high sides. A small, round cab. Sharp little eyes, a squeaky clean dash.

'Hundred bucks. But you've gotto drop me off at the taxi rank afterwards.'

He laughs. 'Yes, Ma'am.'

Nice shiny dash. His skin shiny from scrubbing. Some hair wax in his curls.

'We'll go to the workshop, then I'll run you back before we open.'

I get in. The radio on. No sand, no ash, not even on the sack around the gear stick.

'This out the box?'

'Three years old.'

'Looks new.'

'I do the dash with conditioning oil. It takes me just under an hour to get it looking like this.'

'Sheez.'

'It's nothing, it's quick.'

Hope he'll be quick with me.

We go past the crippled beggar at the Military Road lights, blowing his sports whistle. He looks down at people's hands, their bags, takes coppers from cracks in the windows. Blasts his whistle when the light turns green. Drowns out the birdsong on the radio. Some guy's collected songs in the Amazon. He plays some parrots screeching. Says they only use a few sounds in the wild, it's only when you stick them in a cage they start copying things. The ou plays a weird toucan call.

Past more lights, the truck so quiet you can hear the scientist tramping through mud. Cracking branches.

The buttons on Graham's overall. Brown crimpelene cloth, sore against my sunburnt skin.

The jump speeds up, drives windgat suddenly. Pushes through red robots, pumps muffled revs up people's backsides. Straight past Battery Man.

I point, 'Hey! Isn't that it?'

When he doesn't answer, fear whacks my belly like a gong.

I know I'm in shit. He pulls in at Symphony Exhausts instead. It's closed. So's the next door café. The street still shut for the night. I pull up the knob of the lock on my side. He slides his arm across, grinds my hand down on the window frame. Central locking slides back on.

'Shit, why'd you do that? I'm here to have fun, not run.'

I'm sweating already. He presses the button of a remote. The double garage door rolls open.

'What's your problem?'

He drives in.

'Hey, I'm not into this if you're gonna lock me in.'

But he pushes the remote and we're on the dark side of the roller door.

The scientist plays a blue fronted something calling its mate.

I try the knob again. This time he doesn't stop me. I fall out.

I'm in deep shit. I know it. He flicks through some keys. An innocent green tag says Stock. My brain goes into a panic. That broomstick, if I bang on the metal door it'll make a racket. He turns away, follows oil drops to a blue door. Fits the key. I run, grab the broom. Bang! Bang! Bang! on the roller door. Scream, 'HE-E-LP!'

He shoves the blue door open, charges for me. I try rip open a toolbox mounted on the wall. Shit. It's locked. The only loose thing is a number plate. A broom and a number plate, a big mistake to wave them like that. He susses me out, then moves like a flippin martial arts oke. Grabs the broom, shoves it into my spine. I scream the pain out my lungs. He angles me into the stock room. Locks it.

The number plate blocks a few blows before it flies, skids under a rack of shining trumpets. New metal exhausts. He beats me with the broom.

'No!'

Filthy bastard, hurting me. I kick at him, 'No!'

He hits my legs so I fall on my knees. I try grab the broom, he smashes my hands, smashes my head. I go over my knees, hide my belly, hide my face. Wait for a chance. Grab a steel trumpet off the shelf, swing it at him. Crack his hip.

He shoves me over, glad I'm fighting. His eyes burning silver, drunk on violence. High on the power, his penis stiff in his pants. Fucker. He shoves me over, hits my side. Bastard, hurting the baby. I roll into a ball, scream blue murder. The harder I scream the softer he hits.

I get the game. I wail to protect the kid. Think of it twitching, spinning, tryna hide. Slipping somewhere under my muscles, tryna find quiet while I scream like a banshee to keep it alive.

He goes softer, bruises my back, my arms, but not breaking anything. He loves the screaming, he's done this before. In this stock room, cut off from the day. He's in ecstasy, like he's pigging

on pleasure, not beating up a chick. The screaming works. He stands wanking, rows of silver silencers behind him. Pig does the honours. Messes on my head.

Sticks two pink notes under the strap of my dress. He escorts me out, holds my elbow tight. Opens up. Closes. Leaves me there. Whirrs over the bridge behind his beautiful dash. Filthy bastard.

I saved the baby. I think I did. I try clean my hair with a wet wipe. Unwrap my last Triple X mint. Carry on like I'm alive, but I'm shut down. Inside, I'm dead. I wait on the concrete outside the silencer shop. I wait for lights to come on in the buildings. For machines to start up. For keys in the tills. I wait for the day to start up my shocked heart. While I'm waiting, I get the whole flash. Clear as day, like a photo.

Graham's just finished with that slimy stuff. You walk in. His pants are still down, his hairy bum's facing the door. I see your face, it's frozen like the picture I drew of you at school. Your eyes too big, your nose a straight line. Lips cut in, too high on your chin. You look just like my drawing, Mom. You're in your khaki Croc World uniform, with its brown men's shoes. You walk backwards, hit my wardrobe. Graham jerks round, knees bent to protect his jewels. You crab walk, bump out. Graham hisses, 'Hide the book, it's making Mom sick.'
I'm stuck, still thinking about how I'd drawn you so ugly. But I hide the Hustler when I hear you being sick. Flushing the toilet again and again.

You saw.

I can't even cry.

I wait for the street to come awake. Wait for the weak sun to charge me.

I'm gonna get him. Wait for the exhaust shop to open. Tell them what happens in their stock room.

Maybe they already know.

Above me, a gull flies straight along a telephone wire. Up over the bridge. Dead straight, maybe to the sea. Incredibly white. Soft under its tummy.

No.

I'll follow that bird to Battery Man. I'll show him. I'll go show his boss what he's done.

I make my beaten body walk.

There are girls on this road. They must know him by now, know what he's into. Tell him to get lost. That's why he came all the way to Sunrise. There's a princess on the road, I swear, colour of Illovo syrup. Hair burnt golden. Maybe it's the beating, my nerves. Maybe it's magic, the morning sun. The plait down her back is maybe just cheap peroxide, maybe it's just old, split rope. But me, I see burning gold. She leans back against a lamp post, her hips daring the drivers.

There's a deli in the middle of all these factories. Funny nuts and fat tin cans that say Asparagus Spears in Brine. My stomach clenches air. Sical coffee. Fusilli. I go past the Granite and Marble Specialists. Past Used Auto Parts. Past Evergreen, a yard full of ship containers, piled high. Nowhere near the sea. Just waves of traffic.

I stuck the Hustler inside Angie's book on farm animals. The cart horse on the cover had long feathers on its legs. You didn't even see Sahara Jones and you got sick in the toilet. Sahara Jones didn't shave her legs. She had blonde hair everywhere like that silver leaf tree near the soldier's memorial on the beach. And boobs hanging heavy like paw paws. Sahara Jones would have made you vomit even more, probably, cause Sahara made Graham stick his thing into me. So I hid the Hustler between the farm animals. But I knew he'd want it back, when you were at Croc World and he came home to eat and get strong for night shift. Make lush with me, eat roast meat and green beans that Gladys made, then go and shove those levers, make the lights come on, make the train engine go. The noise messed up his eardrums and made him deaf, made him shout instead of talk and put the TV on too loud.

My God, I'm dizzy. I lean against some vibracrete. The golden princess is pissed off, me leaning on her beat. Her fists at her sides, a fighting spine. Forgetting to invite the drivers. I hang onto the edge of the wall. See up there, on a high green container, her pimp like a sniper. Standing up to check me out, showing against the sky.

'I've been beaten up.'

She shrugs. 'Go there.' Points behind me.

Over the wall, a mess of metal. Crumpled cars stored two up, one on top of the other. In the driveway, a tiny green Anglia. A giant unravels out of it. His big bullet head level with the chassis of a smashed car.

'Hey.'

He holds up a hand to stop me begging. I go in the gate, follow the giant up a long, long rubber mat going to the office. It covers black sand, lost washers, engine nuts. Inside, a guy in a wheelchair. Long hair, creamy skin. Doing the books.

'I need to get to hospital.'

'What's up, Lady?' Only now the giant talks to me. He's got one eye much smaller than the other. A floppy bottom lip.

'I've been beaten, but you can't see it.' I can feel the colours that will come. The blue, the pink, the red. They'll come slowly with the sun.

'I just need to get to hospital.'

The giant doesn't believe me. 'You ggeally shouldn't wish that.' A problem with his r's. 'I've spent enough time in that place.'

I hang onto a screen that has perfect punch holes in it. Hooked onto it, old tailgate lights, labeled in koki. Fiat. Opel Kadette.

'Bike accident,' he says.

'The bruising's still coming, so it doesn't look like ...'

'Him, he spent longer.'

The wheelchair guy gives us blue heat like a welding flame. Shuts us up about his accident.

'Can you call an ambulance?'

Giant's confused now. Thought I was leading up to asking for money. The wheelchair oke pushes some tea towards me. The cup has clouds on it. He spoons in three white sugars. He looks like those racing car drivers on TV after the Grand Prix who

sweat themselves beautiful. Behind him are oily black bones, car parts cut from horrible accidents.

Two survivors, these guys.

The tea is made with condensed milk. Wheelchair gets Giant to plant a plastic chair outside the door. I sit there with the tea, burn my lips.

Cars piled up like it's mating season. Then electrical poles, with wires strung. On top of that, a clean, clean mountain. Stripped clean in the night. Oily dust streaked down the storm water drains. Just a few clouds stretched from drip drying in the sun. I must have said something about the mountain, cause Giant says, 'You should come back and take a photograph.'

Like I'm a tourist come to see scrap with a mountain balanced on it.

I start to shiver in the sun. 'Please call an ambulance.'

Giant calls an ambulance. 'A woman here says she's been beaten up. No cuts, no. No bggoken bones ... No, I don't think it was ggobbeggy.'

I sit shivering like a wet dog, tryna figure out ggobbeggy. Stare at my knees, feel the pain pitching up. Digging in where the broomstick landed. I drink more condensed milk tea. The ambulance doesn't come.

Giant helps a customer. Ford Sierra door handles. 'They bust when the mechanism inside busts. It's not the plastic, it's the metal inside. I've got a few on the left side, what do you need, fggont and ggear?'

'What?'

'Front and rear,' I say. I've figured it out. Ggobbeggy. No, it wasn't robbery. But he could've smashed the baby. He could've crippled it.

Wheelchair asks, 'Where do you live?'

'Muizenberg.'

'You can get one taxi, all the way. Can you stand?'

It's sore to stand, and the world goes warped. Watery.

He wheels up to me, 'Jump on.'

I park on the arm of his wheelchair. We roll down the rubber mat. He stops a taxi on the road. The driver turns his sound

system down for a bit. Wheelchair talks to him, pays him with coins from his top pocket.

I know the band, its Skwatta Kamp. The dashboard traps a thousand flies, sounds like, buzzing with the base. The oke raps about how he loves the sun, how he's so stoked he's an African. The taxi volume wipes out the world, wipes out my mind. The drum beat blasts through my feet, splits the flippin axle. There's a Rasta next to me with slow eyes. Was he born with those big eyelids, sealed at the sides? His dreads smell like Lady, when she'd been in the rain. The noise, it gallops. Rolls through me, round me. Holds me tight. Inside the violence of sound it's safe enough to think of my tummy. There between my hip bones is a pool of no pain. I try my muscles. Number one. Number two. Number three. All fine. Place of flippin safety. Can you believe it? My belly's okay.

I think the baby's okay.

The music gallops, wraps me up. Some chicks sing the chorus, sing it's up to me to get the joy I need. It's inside me, they say, go look for it.

The baby's okay. The baby's okay. Thrill from my stomach runs up to my throat. A laugh rattles there, buzzes like the dash. Breaks onto my face. The Rasta smiles with me, his heavy eyes green as weed.

The taxi takes me right to the finch house door. A note from Bonita and the girls. In pencil on a torn page of a school exercise book, We came to see you. Each signed their own name.



The finches sing a welcoming party. Hungry, like me. I turn the taps on soft. Take seed in, uncovered. Only a slight tightening. One, two, three cages. The lounge cage last. The Syndol looks ancient. Covered in bird shit. The hunger hits. I want some. Finches trip around my head. I sit against the mesh, under a ledge. Don't touch the pills. Pull up my dress, watch the

colours. My arms covered in stripes. My thighs, my chest. But my stomach is clear. I saved the baby.

My shoulders are sore. I feel my back with my fingers. Lower back, one sore stripe across a kidney. One cheek bone aching. I did a good job. Finches flutter round me. Touching me soft. Touching me where he hit. I sit like this, pick up the pill box. Pick off the feathers. I need some now. This time for real. It's normal for sore. I pull out a whole sheet. Ten peace pills. Clip, clip, clip, the sound's in my mind. The clip of the foil off the back of each pill. But I only take two. That's normal for sore. I sit there with the bird song and the running water. Then I click, it's the bath. Struggle up.

The bath's running over. I leave the Syndol on the edge, drain some water. Get in slowly, spill some more. Take my dress off once I'm in. Check again. My stomach's okay.

Madeleine bangs for ages. I hear her calling, but even when she's inside, I keep quiet. She comes in lugging her big stripey bag. She covers her mouth with two hands, stares at every inch of my body in the bath. Tryna rub the marks out with her eyes. 'A client,' I tell her.

She can't speak.

I tell her the whole silencer story. It comes out like broken twittering.

Madeleine touches the skin on my stomach, checks it out carefully. She sighs, 'When will you stop your suffering?'

'What do you mean?'

She picks up the Syndol. Zips it into her weatherproof refugee bag.

'When will you stop?'

Something strips in me. Bitch. Taking my pills. Blaming me.

'And what about *you*? When will *you* stop? If you trust God so much how come you don't stop watching the trains? Why do you worry and wait your whole life?'

Madeleine's eyes fill with bath water. 'I want him home.'

She looks at the floor, taps the pool with her sandal. She comes up, whispers, 'I have lost too many people.'

I feel so shit, I go for the throat. 'But I'm not your daughter.'

She stares at me. Her tears drain back. I swear, she grins.

'Yes. But I can still be your mother.'

I'm confused.

'I learned that from Phyllis. She has no children. But she helps us all.' Madeleine's all chirpy again, 'Come, we go and get orders for veils.'

'What?'

'Come, the bras are finished. Now they want their own veils for the concert.'

God, there's no stopping her.

'You tryna trick me to dance?'

'Not to dance, Tess. Look at you. But you must not be alone. So you must help me with the orders.'

She helps me to dress. Long sleeves, jeans. All that shows are bruised hands, a streak on my cheek. She watches me chuck my head back, stretch my eye skin. Sting my eyes new with Safyr Bleu.

When we get there they're doing loose hip circles. Big, loose ones, all come undone. Red Scalp's in orange tie up clothes. Tie up pants, orange criss crosses across her back. When she sees me her eyes turn to worry, tie me up. I sit like a prisoner where Madeleine puts me, next to her striped refugee bag. Crispy tries her best not to stare, but she's not very slick. Madeleine joins in, does the circles. Her hips nice and loose, but her eyes hold me there, holding me up. She's babysitting big time.

Red Scalp talks while they're circling. 'Remember belly developed during a time when childbirth was very dangerous.'

Shit, she's looking straight at me.

'They've found thousands of gravesites, skeletons of women with their babies stuck in their birth canals.'

'Aah no,' go the women.

'So the women developed the dance to get ready. To get strong.'

Red Scalp smiles straight into my eyes, 'Belly is about coming to the world alive.' She slips to the CD player, pushes a switch. The drum beats gather, she turns it up. 'It's about birth!' The drums strike the studio air, strike the mosaics, shatter them

into splinters of light. The cats get the hell out, stick close to the ground.

The women do the hip, hip, hip smack thing, shoot their hips up to their ribs. Get strong for the baby, strong for the pain, facing death with their hips, whipping it.

The music's finished, the women are laughing. Suresh, the Indian girl chucks herself flat on the floor. Madeleine pours over forwards, panting. Red Scalp says, 'And just think. Just think. In Victorian times when the women went mad and convulsed backwards, Freud and the doctors said they were begging for sex. But what if that was the start of no? Because the power to say yes is the power to say no.' Only some of the women are listening. They laugh, echo, 'No.' Follow the others, hustle to get the practice veils off the hooks. One cat comes back in. Sits on the threshold and listens with me.

'Because once your hips unlock, the earth can connect with your head.' Red Scalp comes to me, puts a hand on my head, a hand on my stomach. 'Brain to feet.' Cause of the chaos of veils, no one notices Red Scalp doing magic. They're all too busy feeding on colour, running their fingers along the hems, tryna find the long ends.

Red Scalp drifts behind me, strokes down my arms, hard but gentle. Her hands have an electric effect, I swear. She grips my fingers hard, says, 'Giving you the energy to stand by what you're feeling.'

It's like someone dropped a coin down the well. A sure feeling lands in the pit of my belly. What I knew in the taxi when Skwatta Kamp was rapping and the Rasta saw me smiling.

This baby will live.

Underneath my clothes, my skin the colour of veils. A dawning of blues, plums and suns.

I will give birth to this child.

I watch, all worked up for the rest of the lesson.

'Take your veil. This is your soul.'

Red Scalp gets shy smiles.

'If you're dancing in the concert, you will want your own.' She dips her head at Madeleine, teases, 'Speak to Madeleine about your soul.' Their practice veils rest at one hip. 'Okay, light fingers on the far corner, ready to step.' They float forwards. The silk slides up smooth into transparent flags, air magic, the colour of bruises. Shimmering screens brush their arms, their temples with colour. Silk from their fingertips, pouring in circles, swirling figure of eights in front of them. Watching, I feel the silk on my bruises, the gentleness of Red Scalp's touch, the sureness of life, there in my belly.

I help Madeleine take measurements. Work out their wing spans so she can make them veils. I hold the tape measure, but it's Nora who reads off the numbers. Then Nora's holding the tape and Madeleine's measuring me. Saying, 'Tess, I will make you something pretty.'

'But I don't dance.'

Red Scalp hears. 'You don't dance, but you're born to it.'

I shake my head, shake off her words. 'Not born.'

Red Scalp laughs, free from her stomach. She stands, hands on her hips, a flaming red tamer. 'Okay, not born.'

Everything's a big, fat joke. Madeleine's fingers are gentle on my shoulder blades, getting the measurement. She joins in the teasing, 'Tess was not born, she fell down from the sky.'

Madeleine says, 'Come Tess. Come home tonight. ' But I'm still scared of the loft and the sweetness of the girls. Plus the Princess will be covered with wet towels.

'No, no, I'll be alright. I should never have gone with that guy.' She watches me, soft, like the birds. 'Stupid,' I say. 'It was stupid.'

She puts pressure. 'I saw Bonita's old boyfriend in a car at the station.' She flutters her big fingers at her throat. 'With the tattoos here.'

'Did you tell Bonita?'

She nods. 'In a black car.'

I fret, torn between two bloody dramas.

I shrug, step off the pavement towards the finch house.
She asks, 'What have you got to eat?'
I tell the truth. 'Tuna.'
One tin left for the kid.



miracle number three

But once I've decided, Red Scalp's spell loses its thrill quick, quick. I fret myself stupid. I'm three months pregnant. I'm keeping it. But how the hell am I gonna bring up a kid?

The next few weeks, I do lots of jumps, for the bucks. But also cause it makes me feel safe. Weird hey? I used to take pills cause the road was scary. Now I go to the road cause I'm shit scared.

Only now, the jumps piss me off. Badly.

I go with this municipality guy to Silvermine forest. White guy. Won't come to the finch house in case of ratepayers. We go into the pine trees, away from the braaiers. Grey sideburns. Not that old but he's got emphysema. His skin's got no oxygen. Grey blue, matches his eyes. Pat, his name is and how's this, he's in charge of environmental health. 'Air emissions,' he says. His lungs are buggered. He makes a growling noise when he breathes, like an old dog dozing. Chooses a big tree next to a clear stream. Walks round and round it to check there's no ratepayers watching. Gets a spot and round and round he thrusts, like smoke rings, round and round we go.

Maybe I'll take the baby home. Say nothing about Graham. Ask you to help me, Ma. The kid can play with Angie's kids, there at her place, high up on the hill. They can make mud cakes in

the red sand. Play under the plastic tables between the tourists' feet. I wonder if Angie's still got that tame monkey she told me about? The kid would love to play with it. I could work for Ange, maybe. Or, I dunno, wash hair at Lee-Anne's Salon. Maybe learn to cut and style. I'll say nothing about Graham. I'll stay out the lounge. On the weekends I could take the kid to the beach. Watch you fish.

Round and round we go till Clean Air's emission. He chokes at the end. Spits stuff out behind the tree. He drives a red Polo. 'Hack-hack-hack,' he laughs, 'That was an enjoyable site inspection.'

He pisses me off. But his notes are crisp. He keeps them in his boot, in his CD drive. 'Nothing else in your boot? Girls your only sport?'

Fear pays a quick visit, there in his eyes. He's shit scared for his job. He drops his eyes, counts out an extra pink one.

I buy Coke from the garage shop. Spot two winter avos at the back. Geez, I wanna fall on them, savage them. Let them feed my swollen breasts. 'Those your personal avos?' I ask.

He says yes, but sells me one for three bucks. I scoff it as I cross the foot bridge over the vlei. Tear the avo skin with my teeth. Watch a crowd of tiny fish make a graceful turn.

He should have died when I was a kid. I could've gone fishing with you more, like when I was small. You let me lie across your leg. I looked up at your hands on the rod. Up through its eyes, spear fishing the sky. I watched your hands, reeling in, letting out line. Sometimes kisses fell on my face, cool little fish from heaven.

When you got a hit, I fell into the sand, cheered you. Your eyes got sharky, your lips pulled in for the kill. 'It's yours, Mom. It's yours. I hope you get it, Mom.'

When it got close, I shut my eyes and crossed my fingers, looked at the sky, not the green line.

The flapping, twisting, silver fish made you laugh like a happy, happy woman. 'How was that babe?' You shoved your fingers

into its gills. 'How was that, am I clever?' You held it still, worked the hook from its lips. 'Dig a hole, Tess. Quick, a big one.'

I dug like a dog, holding my breath. Lady scrabbled with me, nose to nose, spraying sand between her back legs. When the shad was safe in its grave, you got gentle, looked suddenly all full and fat.

'You got it, hey Ma?'

You'd bait up again, zig zag a strip of sardine on your hook. After you cast, I lay across your leg.

You found out early on, Mom. And you didn't say a thing.

You gave up Croc World after you saw us. Felt something creeping, coming in through your mole. Sure your body was tryna eat itself up. Graham bought you soft cover horrors. But he couldn't keep up with you, you were a flippin speed reader. He tried horror videos, but he got it all wrong. He should have got you Grease, the movie. You would have been stoked cause you and Graham watched Grease in Plett, when you first met. When you were dressing for Croc World you used to sing while you stuck on your purple Parks Board epaulettes, sexy like Olivia, 'Oo oo ooo ...'

He stuffed up and got The Fly.

You freaked out. But at the wrong thing.

'It's disgusting! What are you tryna do? Are you tryna make me sick?'

You were there the first time I wet myself. I was watching The Fly. I wanted to see what *else* made you sick Ma, other than catching us like that. So I put the movie on with the sound low. Gladys's radio jived in the kitchen, the steam iron's throat rattled through the house. The smell of cauliflower cooking. Swish, as you turned the pages of your book. Angie and me watched The Fly with the sound nearly off, me tryna guess which part was too disgusting for you. Angie was two, I was six.

This guy got stuck in his machine with a fly and he started turning into one. He got uglier and uglier till the man in him died and he puked up this green stuff all over the place. Geez. I

wet the carpet like a dumb dog. Lady tried to lick it up. I ran to you, 'Mommy, Mommy, I wet my pants.'

You looked up from your book, you sounded stone dead, 'You must have a bladder infection.'

But you didn't take me to a doctor to check. You left it.

Gladys blotted it up with the Sunday Times. The bikini girl on the back page got my wee. I watched the rest of The Fly from the door. When the scary parts came, I picked Angie up and ran away. Then I crept back for more, still tryna see what else made you sick.

Never.

I walk back to the finch house, thinking bitter.

Not me. Never. I could never go live with you and shut up. Take my kid there and say nothing, like you.

I look up Battery Man. Get the receptionist.

'I wanna speak to the boss.'

'He's busy at the moment. What is it in connection with?'

'That driver of yours ...'

She grabs a quick breath. 'Yes ...'

'The white guy.'

'Clive?'

'He locked me up at Symphony Exhausts on Monday. He beat me up with a broom. He found it exciting.'

She starts moaning like she's being tortured right there at reception.

'Hey. Lady.'

She snuffles, 'Are you a girlfriend?'

'I want his boss to know.'

She whispers right in my ear. 'He's my son.'

Shit. I had the whole thing waxed. 'I don't care. Get me the boss.'

She flippin starts crying. 'I'm sorry. It's trouble after trouble with this child.'

'He nearly killed *my* child.'

'What? What?' She struggles to come up.

'How come he likes to hurt women?'

A cut up sigh. 'His real father was a very violent man. Especially with Clive. That's why we left.' This woman's useless at keeping back tears. 'He said it's the only way to handle a boy.'
'Wake up lady, he's a grown man now. He's bad news.'
She swallows, sorts out her voice. 'Are you going to lay a charge?'
'There's no point.' Sheez, for once it gives me satisfaction to say it. 'I'm a prostitute.'

I saved the baby from one crazy. But how the hell am I gonna look after it? Maybe I'll go high class. Silver service. Work for a boss again. A room with a soft bed and a shower. When I scream, security will come running cause the boss's gotta look after his stock. I could put the kid in a crèche. Or pay someone to stay at the flat. Maybe Madeleine, if I pay her. She and Noel could care for the kid. I'll lie to the child, say I'm a receptionist.
Tell her all I ever give, is telephone messages.

I could go high class, now I'm off pills. They kept me down, that's for sure. They kept me easy, but they kept me down. That's what Emily said, our manager at the Newlands agency. 'I need sharp girls. Clear eyes, clear skin. Girls who don't slur. Is that asking too much?'
She told me to get lost. Shit, her with her arthritis hands, only forty and she was nearly crippled. Chewing on painkillers all day. Stupid of me to take her pills though. But she was taking nearly all the bucks, so I reckoned it was right I should share her Voltaren.

If I went high class I could tell the kid I'm a beauty therapist, or something.
But that'd be a big fat lie.
Like we lied, me and Graham. We kept it secret. But you lied worse Ma, cause you're a mother.
Plus you lied to the whole world about your cancer. Even Mrs. Frick at the library battled to keep you alive. 'Long enough to see her little girls grow,' Mrs. Frick whispered it loud, didn't care that I heard. She put the terror of your death in me, so I

ran quick, quick, quick to the library when you hit the halfway mark in your book. When the library ran out, I sat on your bed and chatted. Chatted, all worked up, scared that the cancer was creeping.

You lay there and lapped it up. I kept talking, about the neighbours, how Marty Trakoshis was Spanish dancing one afternoon in her lounge. She was playing the castanets and the next door Alsatian ran in and attacked her hands. Now they're all bandaged. About this girl Cindy everyone said was a nympho cause she was in love with an Indian waiter at the Hibberdene hotel. I didn't know when to stop, just like with my crying. I didn't see stop streets. When I read aloud in class and didn't take a breath, Miss Holland, the English teacher said, 'Tess, you *have* to learn to stop at the stop streets.'

I went on till you stared at the charging impis. Then I'd go bug Mrs. Frick, 'Mrs. Frick, my mother's got nothing. How much longer, Mrs. Frick, before the new books come?'

Mrs. Frick, she got caught in her own good deed. She had to order horror from everywhere. Books that could probably wake up killer cells, kickstart a cancer. Stories about women chased by half wolves and women who got their breasts sliced off with Chinese switchblades. Stories about nice pets getting possessed and psychics who saw kids being buried alive. When I asked you, you told me. You got all worked up, genuinely scared. Made me shit scared, too. But when you told me that story about Carrie who chucked things round with her eyes, I remember I felt jealous. She had a gift. She could wreck the world with her thoughts. Me, I had nothing. Just stupid eyes that cried.

God gave me nothing. Even when I prayed. Any case I suspected God was a perv. When you first met, Graham was sweet about your mole. Always said it was a huge beauty spot. When you wore your short denim shorts, when I was still small, he said God was so busy drooling over you, he dropped the whole pot of beauty spots. Spilt them on your leg.

I read you all the stories I wrote, the ones from English class at school. But I got no more prizes after standard six cause I started writing gruesome for you. Sheez. Like that dumb story I wrote about this killer. Remember, I called him the Cereal Killer. He stole the cornflakes competition slips from the shop. He phoned the mothers and told them they'd won. 'Come and get your cereal!' he said. He waited at an old warehouse in town. He was helluva friendly, dressed all smart. He tricked them inside and locked them up. Sometimes just the mom, sometimes the mom and the kids. He starved them to death and plucked their eyes out. Makes me sick when I think of it, cause of Amanda, cut in the sand. He dried their eyes out and ate them like raisins. Geez.

Remember Ma. That's when the teacher said, 'Enough!' and gave me bad marks. The other kids said I was sick. But it was you who was sick. I was just tryna make you better.

You said you were proud of my creative writing. And proud of Angie's swimming. But you didn't come to any prizegivings. Graham never came either. He said he had nothing to wear. He wasn't lying, his wardrobe was nearly empty except for his train driver's uniforms. But when I won the English prize in standard six you kept my prize next to your bed. A book of English quotations. It soon had a tea ring stained into it.

You used it against the Christians. The old man down the road, with the glasses like Madeleine's. They pulled his eyes out their sockets, made them water with strain. When he took them off, his eyes snapped back. His toenails grew like vines, up, up towards the sun. It was their staffie Bruno who got stuck to Lady. Him and his wife thought only sinners die so young. So they tried to save you. They sat on your bed and said Jesus would forgive you if you really and truly in your heart wanted him to.

That freaked me. What terrible thing had you done? Maybe you'd killed someone. I thought about it. You didn't kill your dad cause he got knocked into the hatch of a boat by a ton

of pilchards. And you didn't kill your mom because Granny Doreen flew off the back of a delivery boy's motorbike. She was a nurse at Humansdorp hospital. Bumming a lift back from night shift, you said.

You nodded and murmured until you got fed up. 'The tendency to turn human judgements into divine commands makes religion one of the most dangerous forces in the world.'

I knew it was a quote from my book, cause you never talked like that. You must have had time, one day, between killer plants and house cats turned psycho. It was Georgia Harkness who said it, I looked it up. I don't know if that's a man or a chick.

The old man and his wife got all awkward.

'I'm tired,' you sighed, suddenly all weak. 'I need to sleep.'

When they went, you hissed at me, 'If you let them in again, then *you* be the sinner! *You* confess! *You* be forgiven!'

I went crying to Gladys, my head in her lap. I begged her never to let those old people in. Never, ever. The one with the long toenails and the bible. Not him or his wife. I made her promise. Gladys patted my back, calmed me with terrible Zulu words. 'Igwala,' she said, over and over. Coward. But I knew she didn't mean me.

'Scrub yourself clean. Brush your hair till it shines.' All the orders I got from your bed. Sea water stuck in my ear. 'Put your head to the side and jump. Jump.' But you never came into the bathroom. 'Dry between your toes.'

No. I won't lie to this child.



It's Easter holidays, must be, cause kids on skateboards carve up the tar. Some boys play cricket in the road, bowl OUT! against a black dustbin. Girls go round in twos, piles of thin plaits like they've got time for hair now. I leave the stretched Jesus door open cause I don't wanna be all alone with my past. Flip, this baby's churning up old stuff. Not just the new pictures I know

are true. Also old memories, like from the back of the shop, the personal avos.

Two big girls cruise past, maybe sixteen. One white, one brown, their hair brushed bright like for a flippin photo shoot. They go heads up, boobs out, the same fake jewels on their wrists. Excited to be out with eyeliner on. Virgin written all over them. Geez, when I was sixteen I was living with Dave Delirious from Radio Mango. Sixteen with red stripes. Red lipstick. Red nails. I met him when I was still only fifteen. My first week, my first escort agency in Durban. He got me innocent. I hadn't had sex for money yet. I was tryna be a true blue escort, not a slag like the others who got their agency cut for the date, plus cash from the client for going all the way.

Dave Delirious was actually Dave De Wet. He was thirty six. Animal skins in his tiny flat. His wife got the house. He dared me to walk naked in front of the window. He wanted people to say, 'Have you seen Dave's little flossie?' At parties he kept me on his lap, whispered, 'Kiss my ear.'

But back in the flat he wasn't half as nice. Farted in front of me. We had sex, yes, but it wasn't half as buzzy, the thing between us, as on the veranda of the Malibu. Those white plastic chairs, everyone drinking vodka with passion fruit. Watching Dave, the radio DJ and his young chick.

He didn't pay me, it was a real relationship. But I nicked some from his wallet. Never more than fifty a day. Funny how that's still my minimum flippin pay. He knew about it, planted the pink one, I think. Payment for the tongue in the ear parade. He shopped with me, stood outside the fitting rooms. Rolled his eyes and said something about the appetite of women. Chatted like that to the shop workers, who just about fainted to meet him. Dave didn't talk to me much, just played old tapes of his radio slots. But he had a short, deep tub right under his shower. He taught me to trim my pubic hair in a strip, like in the blue movies he watched to get going. I wasn't shocked. I'd seen Graham's mags all my life. Ag, the blue movies made me feel a bit seasick,

but I fixed it with cheesecake from the bakery downstairs. Up to my chin in bubbles, cheesecake and a pink one from his wallet, I felt like the queen of Morningside. Thinking Graham would freak if he could see me, and Mom, you'd do Arab springs in the grave you prayed for.

On the radio Dave Delirious dedicated songs to his 'little sizzling lamb chop.' But at the flat he started running me down. My accent was cheap, I ate like a pig. I laughed too loud and too long. Then he started sending me insults from his wife. 'Catherine called me at the station, Tess. She said it's not just your age, babe, it's your breeding.'

Another time, 'Catherine says you're probably going to give me an STD.'

Bastard.

Bonita and the girls come crashing in. Josie unzips her top, pulls my wooden horse out. It's decorated in all colours of scooby doo wire. Sharonne's in a bright pink top. Bonita boasts, 'She bought it herself from Mr. Price. The money she got from sewing.'

'The sequins?'

Sharonne's eyes flash proud.

'Nice. What are those?' I tease her, pointing at her screaming pink toenails.

'Passion Pink,' she says, seriously. Then she goes quiet, stares at all the birds. Josie causes a commotion, hits the cage to see the birds make a cloud. Sharonne and I shout, 'Stop!' I tell Josie they can die of heart attack. Sharonne's impressed. She stares at them like they're made of crystal.

I make them some tea. Ask Josie to go buy milk from the shop, but Bonita gets all edgy. Puts Darryl's home number into her cell, makes Josie take it.

'Two minutes there, two minutes back. I'm watching the clock.' Bonita has a good look round the place. Checks the lining of the curtains, lifts the mats with her toes. Ignores the birds. Stays away from the peach couch, like she knows. She flips through one of Darryl's House and Homes. I'm burning my fingers on

the tea bags when Sharonne creeps up on me. 'Tess, can I bring my boyfriend here?'

'Huh?'

I think sick. Think sex on the peach couch.

'That boy from school, Roland.'

'What for?'

'Tess, he wants to come see me after school, but ... but I want my mom ... not to be there.'

'Why not?'

She shrugs just like her Ma. 'Because Tess, everyone knows she goes with men.'

I'm flippin' struck down with guilt. Bonita's guilt. My guilt. My ears burn hot as the teabags. I press more brown stains into the mugs. She's looking up, tryna see into my eyes.

'Is it the guy who's gonna teach you to surf?'

'Ja.' She smiles, love all over her face. 'But I hate getting my head wet.'

I laugh with her.

Sharonne knows about her Ma. She's skaam about her Ma, but she tries her best to be like her. Same Vaseline cream to make her skin shine. Same lipstick over the line. Dangly earrings, just like her Ma.

Josie gallops in. Dumps the milk. Behind her the sound of wheels on the wood. God. An invasion of plastic bikes. Josie's brought Nora's boys with her.

'You can come here,' I tell Sharonne. 'But only when *I'm* here, hey?'

'Ja, of course.'

The world rolls off her shoulders, she's glad as anything. It must be cause I'm pregnant, but pride makes a lump in my throat. She's just a girl with baby breasts and new underarm hairs. Now a boy's noticed her out of all the girls in school. I polish the teaspoons on my t-shirt, to give me time to swallow.

Nora arrives. Nora and Bonita start flapping their gums, talk like they're cousins or something. The boys race their bikes in the passage, freak the birds out. I shut the door. Josie wants to go in the cage, let them sit on her.

I say, 'Okay, but move slowly.'

She goes in with my wooden horse. The finches think it's feeding time. They flock her, flick her, but she just gets the giggles. She does a few sudden moves to make the birds panic, till Sharonne and I shout, 'Stop it!'

Josie whistles to them, pats her shoulder, 'Come and sit.' When they won't, she shoots out a hand, tries to catch one.

'Uh-uh. Out!'

She leaves the horse on the floor, runs out the door, the two blonde boys after her. Bonita jumps up, calls her back. 'Not one foot on the pavement.'

'Ma!'

'You can play on the wall.'

Bonita tells Nora her whole life story, just not the grief. It's all decorating today.

'I think it all started with my mother. She worked in a factory that made Roman blinds. She brought all the catalogues home, so I could see all the lekker things you can get, you know? And I always wanted a beautiful home. A beautiful, big house.'

This is Bonita, sleeping on the street with a knife under her head. Running from her boyfriend's teeth, camping in my flat.

'My sisters are factory workers, but no, I thought, not me. Me and my husband, we went into Novalon.'

Bonita lies, she didn't marry the guy. That's why she gets no maintenance. The oke worked for a flooring company, had a problem with depression. Only thing that helped was time off with his buddies, shooting pool. Drinking beer. So she stood in for him. Laid the screed, skimmed it. Measured, cut. Mopped the glue. Matched the patterns. Drove his bakkie, filled his contracts. I know the whole story. She only tells Nora the good half.

'I kept saying to my husband, there's big money in vinyl if you make it look like something else. You know that wooden look? The pattern is of wooden planks? That gave me the idea to make one that looks like hessian.'

'Sacking?'

'Ja. The rich people have hessian all over their house. Two thousand rand a square metre, s'waar. So the other people, soos in Plumstead, and lower Claremont, they also want that look. But it must clean easy because they don't have three black women to come clean with carpet foam. And the plastic stuff is ten times less cost. Two hundred a square metre. And it worked. It worked! It sold like ... like ...'

Bonita can't think what it sold like cause her husband chucked off his depression. Chucked Bonita and the girls. Got his dead brother's money, had a whole lot of hessian print vinyl made. His dead brother's wife did the books for the imitation hessian. And she didn't mind pumping an imitation of her dead husband. Bonita tried to apply for maintenance, but by then she was doing sex work to feed the girls. The bastard said they weren't his kids.

'What, you mad?' he said when the social worker went there. 'One father, two children, with a hoer? Sure, sure I'm their father. Sure, like this is real hessian.'

Nora hurries to go wash her little boy's leg. A bright bleeding flower on his knee. Bonita keeps talking like I haven't heard the whole story before.

'The richies love the rough stuff. I saw this CD rack for one thousand five hundred at Home Sweet Home. It had a ugly devil thing on the sides with thin legs and vuil hair. They love that, it's called primitive chic.

Something vicious in me now. Half the story's only half the story. Half the story's same as a lie. I say quietly, so Sharonne can't hear, 'Is that why they screw us?'

She gets me back fast. 'Ja. But more you than me.'

That night, I dream of telling Hanif.

My legs stretch up the hill to the police station. Up, up. I break a sunbeam across the charge office. Up, up the stairs. Into a room packed with lost case files. Yellow, sticky with dust. Empty boxes of Kentucky Chicken everywhere. A window over the bowling green where there's white skittles, old fogies moving stiffly. One bends into a smooth movement, rolls a black marble. Applause bursts out of a can.

Hanif's hair is cut short, his eyelashes are like tassels. But his eyes are dead abalone. He wants me out. I point at the bowler, 'It took millions of years for us to get our heads up. But check how they clap when someone bends over.'

Hanif nods like he's taking a statement. He wedges his bum on the dusty desk, folds his arms, waits.

I blurt, 'I'm pregnant. Remember when the condom popped?'

'Your business.'

'Please buy me.'

'Your business,' he says. Applause outside, someone manages to bend.

'Buy me, I'll convert to Islam.' His dead lips loosen into a laugh.

I can't stop begging. 'I'll stay in the back room.' I stare at the dry water jug. Contract my sphincter, so I won't cry. Outside, the mountain listens. 'I'll be your white monkey.'

He laughs, grabs my breasts. Jiggles them like controls on an arcade game. 'I can have a white monkey anytime?' He shoves my back onto the desk. Kentucky Chicken boxes all round my head. A two way radio goes, 'A young girl has been raped ...'

Hanif lets me go.

I'm outside. Gravity chucks me down the hill. The mountain spits its seeds at me. Suddenly it's quiet from the bowling green. I look up. They're all watching me, the old fogies. Old men bending over the white picket fence. Their faces hanging nearly off. I wake up, shit scared their faces are gonna fall on me, like pizzas.



It's winter this morning. The baby's still got her two cravings, fish and avo. I wear Darryl's leather jacket. Annie's white scarf wrapped round my neck. Try Shoprite for avos. They're all rock hard, so I get hair bleach instead. I drop it at the finch house, hit the road.

My knees are flippin blue in the North Wester. Even the air's purple from the cold. I try the garage shop. Ask nicely for another ripe avo. The guy's thick glasses flash like headlights, hide his eyes. A good deed maybe, feed the pregnant whore.

Weird, but it feels like he knows who it's for. I pig the avo at the vibracrete wall.

The Pretoria policeman gets me before I can hide. He's missing Annie, must be. He knows where I'm staying. Drops me a block from the finch house, makes me go in first.

His shoulder blades are freckled, stick out of his skin. A skinny little twerp, but he doesn't feel the chill. He's the opposite of Hanif. He likes to strip off kaalgat, keep me half dressed. Today he wants to lick my legs. From here where I'm standing, his tongue's long and curly. His bum bones stick out. Sounds like he's saying an Afrikaans name. A woman's name, unless he's praying in flippin tongues.

'Lazaan, Lazaan,' in a little boy voice.

I hope to God it's not his mother.

He goes up on his knees, tries to lick higher. I'm pissed off, I dunno why. Itching to slap him in the face, knee him in the nose. Maybe it'll make him whip out his gun, maybe it'll trigger a spasm of flippin bliss. I can't stop him now, so I test myself out. Try that train fantasy.

Tap-tap-tap of the wheels on the track. But I can't carry on cause I see that it's Graham. The man on the train. Blonde tipped moustache. Sulky stomach. White hips, a woman's hips. Rude, rude penis where it hurts. It's not secret and sexy. Making lush hurts. It gets inside and I can't get away. We're locked like the dogs and I wanna chop him off. Chop him up. Blast him with a hose so pieces fly off and get stuck in the trees.

I slap Pretoria's face. Hard, so he slams on his side.

There's a knocking at the door at the same time.

'Ssssh.'

Another knock.

I'm feeling weak, freaked. Pretoria's flippin fuming. Tomato ears. Red veins in his eyes.

'What, didn't you like that?' I act dumb.

Thank God for the knocking cause Pretoria's in a flippin red rage. 'Bitch!'

'Ag, sorry man, I thought you were into a bit of ...'

He rips his pants on. Shoves a finger into a bruise on my breast,
'I'm not one of *these*.'

'Eina.'

The person at the door gives up.

I follow him at a safe distance to the door. Can't resist saying,
'You don't have to pay.'

Bastard never does. He jerks round, but I make sure to keep my
face sweet.

I take the afternoon off. Go blonde again. Straight bottle blonde,
fighting bloody fit. But Lennie pitches up at the house, whips it
all out of me.

His face is shaved. He smells of some cooking herb. He won't
come inside. There's a new battery in this rag doll, he's got
something ticking in him. Alive eyes. Steps up, steps down
the stair. Keeps staring at my hair. 'I came to tell you, me and
Chantal fixed things up.'

'How come?'

'You know you said I must carve her? I asked her and she said
yes!'

'Oh ja?'

'She posed for me.'

'What, kaalgat?'

'No, man, in a dress.' His skaam switches to naughty. 'A thin
dress.'

'Oh ja?'

'We started talking again. She told me she just wants me to be
close. Not gone all the time. She doesn't want me to feel bad
because I'm ... I'm ...'

We say it together, 'Sterile.'

He sits down on the step, goes slack. Stares at his hanging
hands. 'I told her about you, but she says she doesn't want you
to be my friend. She asked me not to see you.' He lifts his face to
me like I'm a priest, waiting for a watery cross or something.
Shit. A stitch pulls in my heart.

I shrug.

'She's scared we'll have sex.'

I laugh, a dry drain, through air locks.

'I sat behind her first, and she talked. I didn't argue with her because I was so busy carving.'

He's telling the wrong priest.

'The next time, I worked from the side.' He turns sideways, faces my knees, sees his precious wife. 'Then I worked from the front.' He faces the gate. Pure victory.

I say the obvious. 'The dress came off.'

His smile is a wraparound. I dunno why but I wanna hurt him.

'And did you get it up?'

His torch light eyes tell the story.

'So now you're a man again.'

He looks away, hides his pride. 'It's nearly finished. I'll bring it ...' He stops, remembering. I watch him, tight. Don't let him off. He gets up, drifts to the window, puts his face against it. 'It's strange how people go overboard, hey? This guy with his birds ...'

'Ja and you and your horses.'

I'm still doing it, still tryna hurt him, like outside the wrestling.

He fiddles with his keys.

'I hope they can cure the whiplash.'

A fine line between his midnight eyes.

'Your sperm.'

Lennie goes slack with shock. Then looks ashamed, I think for me. He shuffles out the gate. A feeble wave. His smile sad, for sure.

But when he drives off his Mini clatters a happy tune, I swear.

Idiot. Boneless twit. I vlook him in my mind. It's only when I'm changing the newspaper in the cages, smoothly so the finches don't freak out, I see the horse Josie left. Something in my heart sucks empty. He gave it to me. Okay, it's covered in finch shit and scooby doo, but he gave it to me. He showed me his carvings, he showed me his biting horse. He told me how shit scared he was as a kid.

How his wife ate cake cause he couldn't fill her up.

He showed me his pathetic willy.

I leave the horse there. Let the finches shit on it.

He was my friend. I fight the seep in my eyes, feeling empty like his flippin wife. Like I'm just water that wants to run. Alone, so lonely, I wanna hit the walls just to see I'm real. Make pain so I can't feel the craving. I'm lonely with no pills. Lonely with this baby inside.

Lennie just dropped me like I'm a nothing.

Geez, I swear, there I am dying, lonely as hell, and Madeleine arrives, out of breath, bringing presents. She must've pounded down the hill with that blue fabric streaming. She comes in like a smug, rich person. She's made me a skirt and a veil. Says she didn't have enough stuff for a bra. Madeleine's got a huge yellow skirt on. It's like deep honey, dusted with brown pollen dots. A sailor striped vest, red and white. Her pink leggings peep out. Her hair's also in holiday braids. The skirt she made me is that purple, morning sea blue, there where it bumps against the horizon. The veil is the green just behind the sand bank. She says my hair looks nice. She makes me try the skirt on, thinks she's got rights since she pulled me out the bath. Madeleine goes quiet. Stares at my stomach. Lifts the skirt, checks my thighs. Touches my face.

'Tess. You are getting fat!'

Hope sneaks onto her face, sits tight. I lift handfuls of blue fabric. My thighs nearly touch at the top. First time ever. And there's something of Angie in my cheeks. I hide my stomach with my arms, point my eyes at Madeleine's stretched stripes, a fatty lifebelt round her middle.

'I'm getting fat?' I check the mirror again. Geez, I look solid.

'I'm having the baby.'

Madeleine leaps like those frightened buck on the mountain. But she's whooping like a soccer player. She wraps me in my sand bank veil and kisses me through it. Her gladness goes through it, right into me. Makes me laugh like Annie, when those buck parted for her.

Madeleine herds me back into the bloody ring. Into the belly class, like a flippin proud mother. Watching me like she made me, bursting with the news. When we've stretched, we do a

whole sequence to get warm. Hip lifts, hip drops, shimmy shimmy, glide. Red Scalp's raving. 'Beautiful! Beautiful!'

We put on our new skirts. Do it again. Red Scalp's excited as anything. 'Wonderful! We'll do the last part with raised veils. Again!'

My fingertips on each end of my veil. I lift it behind me. The colour so beautiful I can't believe it's me.

When we're gliding, Red Scalp says, 'You're moving as one. Can you feel it? There's no space between you.'

We dance to Shiva, whoever that is. Press our hands together above our head. Our knees bent, we go step tap, step tap, bend to the side. Nine times, then Red Scalp says, 'Stamp it out! Stamp it out!'

We beat the drums of war with our feet, the drums of No. Don't mess with us we've got weapons. We've got hips. We've got heels. We'll whip you, stamp you, into the ground. We drum as one.

Red Scalp climbs onto a step ladder, doesn't care we can see up her skirt. Bulky white thighs, bare toes on the rung. She pulls a strap. Gold pours from the roof. A dazzling shower of shiny, gold cloth. With it, a whole burst of slow dust. No dead arms, no dead legs. No one molesting a kid. No dying mother. That baggy bit in the roof, it's a flippin curtain. An over the top drape, a golden promise, a soft sliding door to flippin glory. The women cheer, their faces tinted with gold.

'You know what this means,' Red Scalp says.

The others nod, but I've got no clue.

'We start rehearsing for the Mother City concert.'

No way, not me.

'I'm starting a Saturday afternoon class. I need names. Whoever's definite for the concert, please put your names on the list at the door. The castle's huge.' She looks straight at me. 'We need dancers.'

No way.

Later, Egyptian touches my hand. 'Are you dancing at the Gay Festival?'

I shake my head violently. Ask, 'What's that?'
'The Mother City Gay Festival. The belly concert's part of it.'
'Not me.' As in no way. Not gay. Don't dance.
'Please dance,' she asks, so, so nicely.
Who is this chick? What does she want?
But next thing they're all asking, 'Come on, Tess.'
'Do it.'
'Dance.'
Red Scalp chucks in, 'We need you.'
I ask Madeleine, 'Are you gonna dance?' She turns up her hands like she's got no choice. A beautiful white smile, makes her look like Noel. Crispy Nora squeezes Madeleine's shoulder. Says to me, 'Come on, Tess.'
I swear, I end up with a shrug. Keep my eyes on a cat's whipping tail. Say, 'Maybe.'
Egyptian and Red Scalp go, 'Yaay!' like silly kids. But then someone mentions September. I add quickly on my fingers, so no one can see. I'll be eight months pregnant. There's no chance of me dancing.
Red Scalp asks us to curtsy. I copy the others. Pointed toe, leg across, arms way up, wrists back to back. Twist at the hips, lean back.
We're holding that lean, trembling with the bloody effort, she says, 'Remember we dance to celebrate the resurrection.'
Oh, God, she's sneaking in some church. She looks at me, at my twisted middle. 'And I'm not only talking about Jesus. I'm talking about the end of all sacrifice.'
She's giggling now, cause we're groaning, fighting to hold the curtsy.
Madeleine moans, 'Phyll-is!'
'Ascension Day's coming up.'
My muscles wanna snap. I keep my eyes on the sparkling gold. I'm not scared. I know the truth. So what else?
'Okay, thank you.'
We drop our shapes, hang our arms. Curse her gently.
I'm hanging down, still seeing gold, when I remember you did say No, Ma. You did. You said No and hit me with your slop.

That time with Draincleaner. It was a big, fat No, cause straight after that, Graham stopped using me like a wife.

You said No, Ma.
You did!

Seems like the stars are in 3D tonight. The cold wind's shined them clear and bright. The sky stretches away like, I dunno, sparkling fabric. As usual Madeleine tries to get me back to the flat. I nearly say yes. To have the girls say, Tess this and Tess that. Bonita telling me the fishing news. Noel catching me whenever I walk past. Giving me bompies. I feel nearly homesick.

'No, it's okay.'

Madeleine gets weird. Touches the skirt in my hands. 'When I sewed this for you, I thought of my daughter.' Madeleine's spotted eyes look blind. Like she's seeing her daughter against some faraway sky, or maybe under some sticky city bush. Madeleine pushes up my sleeves, checks out the yellow smudges from Battery Man's broom.

'I look like a corpse,' I joke.

'No!'

I swear I wanna drop into her, fold into her big, strong belly. Put my ear where I can hear her heart beating.

She tries again, 'Come with me.'

'Ag, no.' I take back my arms. 'I'll sleep better on my own.'



But I don't even try sleep. I take the duvet to the couch. Sit up with the bloody past.

Draincleaner was a short oke with a barrel chest. Peroxide hair and missing teeth. Two grades above. He said he was a Born Again. A couple of his piano keys were broken, middle C was one, I think. The keys were yellow, like his teeth, and when he hit the broken notes it was like, oops, the waiter dropped the tray. He had a good voice, I admit. It was like, I dunno, good earth, you know, dark sand with roots. But he spat when he

sang. I started watching to see where it would land. The keys got slippery, but still he banged at them, singing stuff like, 'It's for you, Lord that I slog, Every day I jog through fog, Holding high your very name, Holding up your sacred flame.'
Except his spit would have snuffed the sacred flame.

He said he was gonna make a recording one day.

'Cool.'

'Tess, how would you like to be flooded by the Holy Spirit?'

'Okay.' It's not like I could choose my friends. Plus I was thirteen, keen to try things. 'What must I do?'

'Nothing. The Spirit will come. It *will*.' Geez, it was like he got personal points.

'It sounds a bit weird.'

'I'll give you a little drink, to make it easier for the Spirit.'

He lived in a back room in his auntie's house. He said his auntie was also a Born Again, gone to visit her sister. She must've also been been bananas cause she hid the key to her drinks cabinet in her old marriage certificate. I swear. Her old husband died from drinking, so she used the crumpled old promise to warn herself off the booze. All she had in there was liqueurs. Maybe to get around God's liquor laws. Thick drinks that stank of fruit. Banana advocaat, peach shnapps, strawberry liqueur, apple.

He took the bottle of apple liqueur. Poured some into our school juice bottles, in case someone came in and bust us. I got dizzy fast. Felt like my teeth were gonna fall out. I ate the jam sandwiches from my lunch box, listened for the smashed glass cords, jabbed a finger in the air when they came.

In between songs he asked, 'Have you been filled?'

'I dunno.'

He sang so hard he blew a white bubble of spit in the corner of his mouth. I pointed at that too, made him wipe it. Happy on apple, I thought the Holy Spirit will have to save me from him and his spit.

I didn't know how right I was till I'd had enough. I'd already worked out a plan. I'd swallow toothpaste for the alcohol smell. Go straight to bed, say I had a runny tummy. But the door to

Draincleaner's room wouldn't open. Another flippin hidden key.

'Where's the key?'

But it's like he didn't hear. One juice bottle of apple liqueur and he was squeezing out tears. Singing stuff that didn't rhyme anymore, 'God's work is so hard, The hardship so hard, No one understands, How hard it is, To work for God.' He sang a song about high school, about ambushes and attacks. I wasn't too stressed, so I stayed for a bit, helped him with some lyrics. 'Jesus, I will fight for you, Take all the flak for you, Be teased and torn apart for you, Fight for my life, For youuuu.'

He thought I was getting close to being filled, but I was just pissed. Singing, 'People say I'm mad for you, I take it like a man for you, Sing my heart out for you, Jesus I will die for youuuu.'

But he still wouldn't let me out. I panicked. 'You'd better get *ready* to die because my stepdad's gonna kill you. You'd better hope he calls the police and doesn't come looking himself.'

He still wouldn't give me the key, so I made a couple of runs, some little kicks at the door. Draincleaner was fast, flippin beef on wheels. Breathing out apple fumes, he caught my foot. 'Hey! There's no need to break things. Jesus tells me no. You can't go. You're close, very close.'

So I faked being filled. I threw myself down like I'd seen at the community hall when I spied through the window.

'Ah Jesus, thank you Jesus, Thank you Lord, for changing me, showing me I'm a sinner.' I started making up a funny language, like they did at the community hall, but that freaked him out. He grabbed me, stuck his hand over my mouth to stop me talking in tongues. His face against my face. I struggled like a maniac, till suddenly he let go, made me spin and fall.

He ran into the bathroom. Came out with Jeyes Fluid drain-cleaner. Poured some into his juice bottle. Poured a bit of water. Oh my God, I thought. It's suicide. He's dying for Christ! I tried to snatch it, but he held me off like I was a bloody insect. Way too strong for me to save. I wanted to run for help. 'Tell me! Where's the key?'

He put up a hand, took a swig. Washed the poison round his mouth. Chucked his head back. Gargled. Ran and spat into the basin. Spoke to the plug hole, 'I do that every time I want to kiss a girl.'

'It's poison!'

'It's right.'

'You're gonna ...' Sheez, then I worked it out. 'You're stuffing up your teeth!'

'My sacrifice.' He shrugged, all noble.

This oke was cooked. I sighed, 'Bless you,' like they did at the community hall. 'Hallelujah. Can I have the key?'

It was in the inside pocket of his school blazer. He got it in the lock, but before he opened up, his eyes got stuck on my mouth. He bolted back to the bathroom for another dose. I got the hell out. Ran home in the dark. Green liqueur on my uniform, my school bag left behind.

You were up. I mean, can you believe it? You were up and waiting in the lounge. You shrieked at me and hit me with your slop. A beach slop, from the old days. A slip slop across my face. Graham was up, his pajama pants hanging on his hips, his white haunches showing. He whispered, 'Flossie. Nymph.'

But he left it to you. You flew all over, arms waving. Screaming, 'How dare you!'

'He locked me in!'

'How dare you stay out with a boy?'

'He didn't touch me!'

'You stink of alcohol. How can you not come home? Like a slut!'

'He was playing the piano!'

'What kind are you? Where's your self respect?'

'He was waiting for the Spirit!'

A mad screaming conversation. My face swelling from the rubber slapping. Christ, I suffered cause of Jesus. Hit in the face by a ghost of a mother, eyes burning black, her hair flat at the back from years on the pillow.

Graham tried to punish me with sex. He came in whispering, 'Little slut.' I kicked at him. I kicked cause I'd seen my mother rise up.

'Leave me, leave me, get out of my room!'

I thought, I'll take fiddling in the night for the sake of love. But I won't take it for punishment. For punishment, I'll take my mother's slop.

Something happened to me that night. I got locked up by a Christ maniac. I didn't get kissed. I didn't get laid. I didn't get filled with the Holy Spirit. But I saw you in a state of rage. I saw you rise up and say No.

So I said No.



I've got No in me, now, but I hit the road hard. It's weird cause all the time I'm remembering No, I'm saying, Yes, try your best.

I mean, half the time I'm thinking, flip, I survived, I got out. The other half I'm legs wide taking it from a stranger.

I get this guy who owns a chill business. A whole flock of salt water tanks, he says, for stressy city slickers. Tells me they go into small, dark tanks and float around in salty water. Tells me it's like the Dead Sea. Talks non flippin stop. 'Do you know why the Dead Sea's so salty?'

Like I care.

'It's the lowest point on the earth. The water has nowhere to drain to. It sits and evaporates and leaves intense concentrations of minerals behind.'

It's like me, the Dead Sea. The lowest point. Nowhere to go.

But all I say is, 'I bet it burns your fanny.'

He's all serious. 'Maybe a little. But the Queen of Sheba, Cleopatra, they all went in to be healed.' He's got smooth, olive oil skin. Shadowy lids. Doesn't stop talking till he goes in. Starts telling me the Dead Sea's where some goat herds found a whole lot of ancient scrolls. They sold them to an antique dealer who

sold them to a university who sold them to a monastery ... I interrupt him, 'Man, do you want your money back?'

He gets on with it. I dunno if he's Arab or Israeli or Indian. All I know is he wants it standing up. Long fingers on my hips. He sings to the finches, I swear, in his thick, oil voice. Each drive in a long 'Aaah,' like a chant.

I said No to Graham after the slop.

And after that, I said No to Gonads. The oke from school, that's what they called him. A handsome guy, big, you know, with hair the colour of beach sand. Golden hair on his legs, the hero of the matrices. He was like, the stud. He even went out with Cindy for a bit, after she'd been with the Indian waiter. 'Nympho,' the kids called her. 'She screws anything.' She must've been grateful when Gonads asked her out, cause he was so cool. He went round with her hanging on like a monkey, like she was so light he didn't know she was there.

But his name gave me the creeps. I imagined two swollen testicles, curling with golden hair. Maybe he saw me staring down there. Maybe that's why he asked me to go down the stairwell with him.

I didn't cry, I was past all that. But I felt trapped. The boys told the girls that Gonads asked me, and suddenly everyone was looking at me with respect. He was bloody handsome, you see. Eyes like sky chips. The other girls acted like I'd won a modeling contract or something. It's like I had no choice.

I was scared in the dark, under the stairwell. I kept my eyes on the blast of sunlight at the exit. Found out quick-quick that his gonads weren't big. He felt around inside my pants. He got his penis out and thought he'd gone in. I swear, acted like he was inside. I got the giggles. Every time he thrust and moaned was funny as hell cause he wasn't even in. He was nowhere near. I laughed and laughed till he pulled my hair to shut me up. Asked me what's so funny.

'You missed.'

He stared at me, tryna read my eyeballs in the gloom. He pulled his pants back up and walked through the tunnel into the blown out sunlight. The shape of him was beautiful. Easy shoulders, long legs. His hair flared like a match when it touched the sunlight.

That afternoon there were rumours I'd had an abortion. The girls cornered me in the girls toilets. He said he'd done an examination and it felt like I'd had one, maybe two abortions. They believed him, even though it was the filthiest thing you could say about a girl in that place. The problem was, I blushed when they said it. Red, red, red, from my nipples to my roots. The rims of my eyes went red, I saw them in the mirror. 'What junk, man. He's telling lies cause he got lost.' It came out croaky and sopping. 'I swear, he got lost.'

I turned to the wall, tryna hide my stupid eyes. Only red haired Lily understood. 'You mean he couldn't find the hole?'

I nodded. I loved her for getting it.

But I cried into some toilet paper when the bell rang. What Gonads said was double terrible cause I had this shame about being different down there. Like Doctor Deranged said.

But I laughed at golden Gonads under the stairs. I told him No. And I said No to Dave Delirious, the old DJ. I said No to him and his flippin gold cross. He bought it for me at American Swiss. American bloody swish. I saw the pamphlets with the junk mail that blew in circles at the stairs.

Just after he bought it, I found out his secret.

I'd had a few shandies. Dave bought me grown up drinks till he saw I got sick quickly, so he switched me to shandies with max lemonade. We were at the London Town Pub. They'd booked him to handle a down-down competition. The boys who went on stage were rugby players or Zimbabweans, not sure which. Muscles in their thighs loose on their night off. Striped jerseys. Funny blunt hairlines at the back. Opening their throats, like snorting beer. Dave whipping up the crowd. It was catchy, I drank too much. I started teasing Dave when he came and sat

with me and his friends from the radio station. Ag, I just wanted to make them all laugh.

‘D’you know that Dave talks to cats in his sleep?’

‘He does what?’ Rupert from the station was always tryna knock Dave. ‘I heard him. In the middle of the night, fast asleep, he went, You’re splendid, my darling. You’re so *beautiful*, kitty cat.’ The band stopped on a flipping ringing symbol. Rupert stared into his drink. Dave finished his, his eyes dead fish. His lips pulled so tight his moustache slipped in his mouth.

Rupert’s fiancé said in the toilets, ‘You know it’s *her* name, hey?’

‘What?’ I squeezed foamy soap into my hand.

‘Kitty Cat. It’s his cute name for Catherine.’

The tap gushing, our eyes crashed in the mirror. I scrunched my hair with wet hands, laughed this crazy laugh, like of course I knew.

The next weekend I’d spent like two hours tryna curl my hair smart, getting ready for his end of the year station party. I was sitting there kaalgat, just my makeup and my new curls. I swear he walked in, lifted my arm. Found tiny black prickles there. Sighed. ‘Catherine says you should get yourself a beautician.’

I danced that night with my arms in the air. Next day I dumped the DJ and his ex, dumped the gold cross. I hated that cross anyway. A ten ton truck on my collar bone. And I couldn’t compete with his Kitty. A spiteful Englishwoman calling me names from Buckingham Palace, rude words and flippin waxed skin. White fingers for clear diamonds. Never mind a cross that goes black in the sea air. A chain you’ve gotto soak in Coke to get it clean. Me, sticky from Durban heat, my one and only chain threading through my freckles, my cheap red paint that chipped in minutes. My melted on jeans to snap men’s necks at the Marine parade. When I left, I took a fifty from his wallet, not one cent more. I dropped the cross into it.

A towtruck driver comes to the house. A strip of orange hair round a big bald spot. His freckles way out of control. Short

little bugger. Shuts his eyes tight, like he's freaked out by the birds. Maybe an excuse to try slip into my bum.

'No,' I say every time. Put him right. 'Hey, open your eyes, then you know where to go.'

He opens his eyes, shuts them again. 'The birds worrying you?' He giggles, so I know I'm right. I take him into the feed room. It's very close to the road, but this jump's nice and quiet. Outside on the road some little girl sings, 'Par-sley, are you sailing away in your sin ...' getting the words all wrong. Her friend stops her, 'It's not parsley, it's porcelain!'

'What's porcelain?'

Silence.

She starts singing again, 'Par-sley, are you missing the love of your skin ...'

'It's *not* parsley.' They start arguing again. I'm bent over the newspapers, the back page. A picture of some young chick tryna look sexy, but too young to pull it off. It's more like she's asking the okes to come play catches, or come eat home made fudge. She's still innocent. Me, shit. I was never like that.

I feel sad, sad, looking at that young, playful chick. Outside, the innocent little girls singing. Inside, the towtruck driver banging, knocking a whole lot of sesame seeds onto the girl's boobs. Towtruck tries one more time for the bum. This time I give his balls a slap. Turn over.

But I said No to Warren the bouncer. No to his bastard photos. Bastard said they were only for him, to keep me alive and naked in his mind. So he used a flash and I posed like I'd been born a bunny girl. I should've known cause first time we had sex, he told all his friends. I tried my best to give him an excellent flip cause girls chucked themselves at him every night. I wanted him to see me, single me out in the Friday night squash. Fast track me into the club. Okay, plus I was a bit into him.

It was just after Dave the DJ. I was off the beachfront verandas, back at the agency. On our nights off, me and some of the escort girls hit the late night clubs, danced up close with ourselves in the mirror. We got high on the electric eye from the straight

boys and lesbians. Watched the gay boys doing their marathon kisses, down the throat on the plastic couches.

I wanted Warren to remember me, so the first night I made him do it on the floor, under the bed. He got a roastie on his spine from a bolt on the bed and the news went out to his old school friends that I was wild and exciting.

‘You look taller, Warren, what have you been hanging from?’

‘Are those rope burns around your wrists?’

Warren was a weightlifter. A school boy tryna be a macho man. He wore t-shirts that said, Try me, you die. Power House. One that said Built, I swear. Schoolboy souvenirs all over his flat. Shot-put trophies, a school tie on the wall with some stolen traffic signs. He snorted coke off a ruler scratched with Warren Smuts, Standard 7, St. James High School. I mean, he was twenty five.

His friend Trevor told me about the photos. He did it in self defence cause Trev was meant to be straight, but I caught him in the fire escape. That night there was the stink of amyl nitrate, made you light on your feet and laugh like crazy. I had like a burst of brilliance. I shouted to one of my escort friends, ‘Hey, you know what? I bet they put poppers in the air conditioning.’ I danced into the fire escape, dizzy and silly, tryna check out my guess. There was Trevor, St. James rugby star, chairman of the old boys’ association, kissing a thin thing with black roots and lined eyes. Hand in his pants feeling for jelly tots. Shame, Trev nearly evaporated. Instead he said, ‘Hey, Tess. Sweet beaver.’

‘What d’you mean by that?’

‘Nothing.’

The thin boy joined in, ‘I don’t know why, but I’m thinking of a purple planet, out theeere ...’

Straight away Trev wanted to rewind, shut his lover up. But it hit me like a flippin train.

‘Oh. Oka-ay ... Has anyone ever photographed this purple planet?’

Trev nodded. Gave me a proper sorry look. The boy shoved through the swing door. Trev gave him a few seconds. Followed him.

I went berserk that night. It must have been the poppers. I ripped at Warren's hair, raked his neck with my nails. Pulled at his ears like they were clip ons. A pity I went so wild cause he felt fine knocking me unconscious. One blow. I hadn't been hit since you slapped my face with a slip slop. That time with Draincleaner.

I woke up in Trev's flat. He gave me three Codis. Put the pack in my pocket. Said they'll take the edge off. A really kind guy, seriously. Always ready with pain pills and a shot of truth. He made excuses for Warren. 'Look my love. What do you expect when people drop six year old kids at school and drive away for a month? The kid is homesick before they're even out of the gates. It's a bad experiment, babe.'

He hadn't come out yet, but he knew I knew. And he'd seen my insides, so we trusted each other. I hung around. Okay, I admit, heartsore. But the codeine made me calm. Dried up my tears. I went from Waterworks to always thirsty. Trev took some too, even though he hadn't been smacked.

That's what I do Ma, after Battery Man. I remember the No's, I keep saying Yes.

Try plan for the baby. Thinking maybe I'll set up my flat, charge more. Put an ad in the Argus, Saucy by the Sea, or something. Call myself something else. Cassandra.

Doesn't go with my freckles.

Maybe Amy.

I overdo the jumps. It's like me fighting against me.

I mean, okay, I'm off pills. I'm incu-bloody-bating.

I'm not scared of birds. I'm learning to dance.

I've got a new black mother if I want.

But no, I go and go and go till I'm raw. I mean, flesh raw.

Sorry Ma, but it's the truth.



A black guy, a suit. Honda Ballade, metallic blue. Works hard for the poor people, like Dumi. Genuine, you can see. Tells me his company's name means Let's Learn Together, or something. Everything's funny to him. He laughs when I tell him my name. Says his neighbour's rottweiler's called Tess. He kills himself laughing when he sees all the birds. This day's gonna tickle him forever, you can see. Just like the worm in his brain's gonna tickle him. I'm not joking, he's having a flippin fine time, giggling and grunting, but suddenly he goes still, loses his hard on. Stares at the corner where the ceiling joins the wall. Oh my God, I think, a stroke. I check for pills. All I find is a photo of two little girls, same chubby face as him, laughing on a roller coaster. Then suddenly he's okay, wipes his face, tells me don't worry. Tells me he's got a worm in his brain from vrot pork he ate when he was a kid.

'Can't they kill it?'

'That will kill my brain.'

Geez. Worried I'll get stuck with him and his worm, I ask, 'Then how do you drive?'

He looks naughty, laughs, 'I'm not supposed to.'

Fine. I go get Darryl's baby oil from the bathroom. In the bathroom mirror I see a girl that says No. Saying Yes.

I finish the man and his worm quick-quick. Split down the bloody middle. Half saying, Hey, look how you said No. The other half flippin sacrificing my body.

Split like this, Crispy Nora picks the wrong time to try make me a hero. I'm heading back to the road when she shouts, 'Hi!' from over the road.

Nora's two boys with their white hair, milk teeth, say 'Hello Tess,' like I'm an old friend. Carry on mixing stuff in a plastic dog bowl. No dog in sight. They carry spoons of water from a blow-up pool. Nora makes me a cup of tea in a frilly kitchen. In an old metal teapot like the one Gladys gave you, Ma. But Nora makes green tea for herself, says it's a diuretic.

She's totally see-through. I mean her talk, not her flared shorts or her little pink vest. She doesn't say to me straight, 'I know you're a whore.' She guzzles tea and sings me a long song about women and men and sex.

'I'm reading this book by Shere Hite. God, I am so glad I found her. Shere sent a long list of questions to thousands of men and women. Do you know, most of the women said they didn't climax with the man inside? You know, during biblical times, going inside wasn't the only way to have sex. The pharaohs had to tell the boys to leave the boys alone and order the couples to have sex, you know, penetration, because they needed more people.'

Nora goes outside, says to the boys, 'If you break the flowers, you will both get a smack.' She climbs up to shut the garden umbrella. 'So the winky in the hole thing was like a law.' I carry her tea pot, burn my fingers. Eina. I dip them in the blow-up pool. Shit, they're sizzled.

Nora battles up there, her skinny arms shaking. The umbrella snaps closed. Spiders' webs fly out, float like a veil. Nora comes down from her flippin sheer height. She fetches a flowery cloth. Purple flowers, tiny little bruises. Pink middles. I hold up the pot, use my t-shirt this time, while Nora chucks the cloth on the table. The milky winter sun sinks into us. The boys rip petals off a christmas flower, drop them in their mixture. Add some broken sticks. Nora pours tea from her pot. 'But we've got our special part *outside* our bodies. Not inside.' Behind her, yellow trumpet flowers stick out their tongues. 'And most men don't bother with it. They just ignore women's rapture ...' One boy runs out the house with a deodorant can. I look away, so's not to bust him. '... thrusting away, and the woman is ever so kind and lets him. A lot of women have to go into the bathroom and, you know, finish themselves off.' He blasts the potion with deodorant spray.

'And that's normal!'

Nora chucks back her tea, starts her next cup. Goes on about how men speak ugly about women, how they cut them down with looks. How they don't take them seriously, how they call them

stupid. The boys have whipped up a muddy foam, chucked the deodorant on the grass. It's a man's one, Blue Stratus. Picture of a seagull.

'But women are boycotting.' Behind Nora, the boys spoon brown foam into her yellow trumpet flowers, down their throats. Nora keeps shoving Shere Hite down mine. 'Women are leaving. Up and out. Or turning to each other. That's why I think we could be friends, you and I.'

Now I stare straight at the boys. What's she saying?

'Not the touchy, touchy type, but as Shere says, to support each other.' More tea from the metal pot. Trumpets dripping brown spit. Nora sings her song, on and on. 'I was lucky. A lucky, lucky fish. My ex used to joke about women's vaginas. He called them tarantulas, he said they smell bad. I laughed to keep the peace, I went in on the joke. But I stopped laughing when he hit me. And where did he hit me? On the tits.'

Nora doesn't have tits. The trumpets bend under the weight of the potion. It's like Nora's drinking truth tea, flippin singing out her guts. She thinks she's found a manhating mate.

Then this thin ponytail arrives at the gate. The mystery dog runs inside. A black and white foxy, with the oke from the supertubes. The rubber band man. His smile is slow and soft. Melts Nora in her chair. The boys run to the dog, take one ear each, scratch behind it. Supertubes bends, strokes their blonde heads. Nora's red, red in the face like she's been caught stealing. Gets up, kisses the oke on the cheek. Gets him a tea cup. She chucks in, to prove she's still serious, 'I was bulimic for years.'

I get up fast, 'I've gotto go feed the finches.'

My crispy new friend follows me to the gate, sees me onto the street. Makes excuses, 'He loves my boys.'

She's come to the wrong place for forgiveness. I slam the gate on my hand as I go. 'Shit!' Her hands flutter over the gate, tryna help, but I stay out of reach.

She begs one last time, 'He saw his own brother commit suicide.'

I turn my back and gap it.

What am I, some flippin mankilling queen?

Stuff her.
She knows nothing about me.

I stay at the house for the rest of the day. Watch horse racing on TV. Think, maybe I am a ballbreaking bitch.
But what about all my dreams of getting married? Of some man loving me? It wasn't just the pills.
I test myself. Let my mind go.

*Maybe I'll marry a jockey. A little oke like a boy doll. So small I could hold him on my lap if I wanted. He'll have dwarfish outfits hanging in the wardrobe, he'll have to stand on his toes to get them down. He'll take me about up to my shoulder. Be quick to fetch my jersey when we leave dinners. He'll get me fresh fish fillets and make me muesli by hand. He will have grey eyes, no vices. He'll have trucks of money, we'll own a herd of racehorses ourselves. I'll appear in the papers with the winning gal, but my pictures will never be posed. Just me, murmuring to the horse, a hand on its noseband.
He will cling to me, cling on with his bandy legs, but his willie's so tiny I'd hardly know it's in and he'll shoot at the drop of a hat. To him I'll be royalty, fit for red and gold silk. He'll be proud of my mind. I'll do night courses, write essays about famous writers. Doris someone and Dorothy someone. I'll be his queen, never mind my past.*

God, I'm pathetic. In the habit of daydreaming stupid princess dreams.
Impossible, dumb dreams and in real life it's just sex with strangers. Sex. Sex. Sex.

At least I know why.

There were thousands of devil thorns in the front yard. Angie and me put rubber mats in a row to make you and Graham a garden path. Angie hopped on the mats, on her way out with Gladys. You were still working then. Graham got the magazines out of his wardrobe and said I'll grow up to be like the girls with hanging lamps. I'll have a man to love me.
'Where will you be?'

He laughed, 'I'll be dead.'
'No, Daddy. I don't want you to die.'
'You won't need me then. You'll have your husband.'
'No, Daddy! I don't want one. I don't want a husband.'
That's the truth.
He made me sick in the head.

I've never even had man friends. Except for Lennie.
I swear, a flippin smile cuts into my cheeks. And Dumi!
I loved Dumi. I didn't care what Graham said.
'That pug here today?' Graham asked after his shift, his top lip all thin.
'What's a pug?'
Graham got that look on his face, like a laugh swimming. He pointed at the ginger hairs on his arm. Spoke slowly, like I was stupid.
'A pug has got black skin, pink gums.'

Dumi had very black skin and normal pink gums. I know cause I checked after that. He didn't have shoes, so his skin was thick from the long walk into those mystery hills where he lived. But he wore a sock on his hand to protect him from invisible dagger claws. He fed his invisible wild falcons with bits of meat crammed into your fishing belt. Stuck meaty fig leaves in the round hole where the rod goes. The birds were quite useful in war. They brought messages from far and sent for backup.

Our friend Sanette was into horses. It was her idea to tape devil thorns to our boots to make spurs. We rode imaginary brumbies we roped in from the wild. We were cowboys, but we used the Indian call.
'Ai-eee-aa-ee-aa-ee-aaai!'
We hid in our mountain, Sanette's gravel heap.

The first time we ever met Sanette, Dumi and I were burying some dolls in that dark Natal sand. Dumi was wailing like a grieving African, but softly. I was mumbling the daily bread part of the Lord's Prayer over and over, scattering crumbs.

Later, Indian myna birds would come in their black suits to snatch them. Sanette watched from the other side of the road, at the foot of the new gravel heap.

‘I know a special song.’

We ignored her.

‘It’s for burying babies.’

She came from a faraway Afrikaans place. I could tell by her accent. And she looked much older than us. I nodded. She leapt up, slipped on the gravel. Snorted a laugh to cover her pain. A raw skid mark on her fat knee, crusty with gravel. If it was me I would have been crying a rut in the sand, but she thundered back home on her little feet. A natural ballerina, probably, but her mother made her fried bread, fried pork, as many fried eggs as she liked. They even fried their pumpkin.

She came back with a fistful of ear buds and a book of ancient pop songs. Dumi and me dug out the dolls, tried not to hurry. She gave us each an ear bud. I did Lucy, the doll with the lazy eye and chunks of yellow hair, empty hair pores in between. Dumi had one of Angie’s new dolls, the unlucky twin. We cleaned out their eyes and their fake, moulded ears. Then we buried them slowly, all over again. Sanette opened the song book and sang that Blue Spanish Eyes song, extra slow. It had nothing to do with dead babies. Dumi fetched Oros and dry macaroni from his mom in the kitchen. Arranged them carefully for the spirits. By the time Sanette sang the chorus, I knew it was bullshit. I grabbed the book and read wrong, ‘Eggleburnt Humpledick.’ I clamped my hand over my mouth, fell backwards, sent the Oros flying all over the flowers. ‘Humple dick! Humple dick!’ I ran round the garden, in one of my mad bursts, letting off nerves. Gladys stuck her head out the window. ‘Ssssh, your mother’s sleeping.’

Sanette took us home to try make up, to clinch us as friends, even though we weren’t much of a catch. Dumi black with pink gums and me all watery and weird. Sanette’s dad was inside, burping on the couch. He saw us through the door, said, ‘Ek wil’ie daai floppy hier hê nie.’

Sanette's mother blocked up the door, no light showing behind her big body. 'Just the girls. The boy won't want to play girls games.'

Sanette's dad's voice rumbled like an oily feast digesting.

Sanette got sucked in somehow, behind her mother. Dumi waited, still thinking of the fried bread and syrup Sanette promised us. He said, 'But I like to play with girls.'

Oily squeaks as Sanette's dad struggled up, spitting, 'Bleddy onnosele munt. Ek sal daai houtie donner ...'

Dumi stayed, still thinking like a kid, waiting for a chink of light. I cracked. As usual overdoing things. I pulled Dumi hard so he fell off the stoep. 'Come Dumi, they hate you.'

Sanette wailed behind the fat barrier, her pa growled behind her mother, lunch slip sliding inside him, me overdoing it again, 'Come man, he's gonna hit you!'

I tried to pull Dumi, make him run, but he shook me off. Walked tall down the drive. I walked with him, a whole body of space between us.

I went and got my school knitting, a blue thing full of holes. I unraveled the whole lot. Dumi and me watched it reverse by magic, a pull of the thread and the whole thing unwound to nothing. Gone. Then we went for a mega sweet fix. Wilsons toffees from Ricardo's café, sheez, a whole pile, one for each tooth. They stained our mouths black, stained us as buddies. We went all crazy from the sugar, then crashed. Dumi made paper aeroplanes, wrote on them with pencil. Flew them into the gravel pile. I sat at the top, cast on my knitting all over again. Wishing I could go into Sanette's. Music came muffled from inside their brick house. Humple dick, probably. But Dumi wouldn't let me out of his sight. Later, Dumi's mom made us pick up the aeroplanes. Just as well cause they all had Dumi's spelling on them, Fuck in fatty.

I get the phone book. Look up Cape Talk. Call the number. Ask for Dumisani Gumede, from the Belly of Africa Feeding Foundation. They don't know what the hell I'm talking about. 'He was also on TV ... uh, Monday night.'

They give me the number for the SABC.

I dunno why I'm doing this. The SABC tries to give me the donation number for his organisation. I say, no, I want his telephone number. The guy on the line sounds disappointed in me.

I dunno why I'm doing it. I ask Belly of Africa's receptionist, 'Can I speak to Dumisani Gumede please?'

'In connection with?'

Graham's shiny buttons.

'It's Tess. It's personal.'

She turns charming, 'Hold on a seccie ...'

'Tess!'

He's so flippin glad, he must have the wrong Tess.

'Do you know which Tess this is?'

'Of course!'

He's faking it, for sure.

'Tess from Hibberdene,' he says.

I'm dead quiet.

'My best friend until I was twelve,' he says. 'Of course I know you.'

My throat aches like I've got tonsillitis. 'I saw you on TV.'

Graham's brown crimpelene makes static on the line.

'Oh God. Sorry, Tess.'

That sorry makes it all true.

'I didn't think ... Dammit.' He waits but my throat is rusted up.

He asks quietly, 'Where are you? Where do you live, now?'

'Cape Town,' I choke.

'He-ey, man! Me too. Where?'

'Fish Hoek.'

Fat chance. Fish Hoek is full of pale, decent people who trim their hedges.

'Man, we lost touch.' The affection in his voice starts a whole sea pushing to get free. He misses the girl he thinks I still am.

'Tess, what are you up to?'

I can't answer.

'Are you married with kids?'

'No. I'm a dancer.' The big fat lie floats me. 'A professional dancer.'

He starts laughing. A big trusting laugh, simple flipping joy. I drop the phone down in the middle of it.

I dunno why I phoned him. I really dunno. Maybe I'm tryna add Dumi to my twisted daydreams. But the real ending's stuffed up cause of who I really am. Imagine if I said, 'Actually I'm a Muizenberg whore. I work Prince George Drive, you know, where the M5 ends. And by the way, I'm nearly four months pregnant.'

I know why he laughed. I know he remembered us dancing in Jojo's horsebox. There behind Ricardo's café. Jojo was Italian and retarded. We never saw his pony cause it lived in the hills near Dumi's place. But Dumi wasn't allowed near those paddocks, the guy who ran the stables said he'd whip the black kids if they went near. But Dumi was safe with me, and Ricardo liked us to hang out with Jojo. Keep him out of the shop with his big bunch of keys. The kid was obsessed, stuck keys in locks all day long. The fridges, the doors, always tryna break into the safe with a big yale key. Cooked in the head. When he got in a huff he stuck his keys into brand new loaves of bread. So we hung out in the horsebox, let Jojo fiddle with the ignition, stick his keys in the ashtray on the dash. Strip Ricardo's cigarette stompies. So long as he didn't mess with the radio. We pumped it up on Radio Five and danced to Guns n' Roses, Pearl Jam, the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Then we changed the station and Dumi taught me to dance like a Zulu, beat the floor with my feet, kick through the back into the sun. All those moves from the hills.

It's funny he needed me then to protect him. Now I'm the one whose gotto hide, so he can't see what I turned into. In those days he was a dirty piccanin. Too black. Now he's a hot shot, feeding skinny Africans. Getting bucks from fat politicians. Now it's me who's too white for the job. Too dirty to love.



Dumi said sorry. That made it all solid. I dunno why, but that calms me down. Like I can trust my own mind, you know? On TV they interview some professor of forgiveness. Fran from Benoni stands up, asks what about Amy Biehl who got stabbed to death by some PAC kids. Her parents forgave them plus paid for their education. Later, two of the guys got bust for rape. So what good did forgiveness do? The professor says, 'Forgiveness always heals you. But it doesn't always heal the one who did wrong.'

So, must I forgive Graham?

I work in the rain. I try be careful who I go with, I don't wanna hurt the kid. But I go jump after jump after jump. I dunno, like I'm tryna prove I'm still dirty.

I fret about the forgiveness thing.

I'm head to toe with a sports scientist. He's into angles, all supple, you know? I pant and sigh so he thinks he's fantastic. I can tell he needs stacks of praise to get to the finish line. The finches watch, twitter, 'Ooh wee. Swee-tie.' The others go, 'Check-it-out-check-it-out.'

Before he leaves he tells me it helps him to stay faithful to his wife. His pretty students try him out all the time. He says he's gotto use will power every day to stay faithful. He says can he come back?

'Ja, sure.' Spare the students.

Amy Biehl went to UCT. A cute little student, sliced to pieces, battered with bricks. And her parents forgave them. They understood.

Must I now try understand Graham?

I know he grew up with his dad stuck to the TV, nicotine dripping off the ceiling. All dressed up with a good, clean, never-ending whiskey.

'It's clean, this spirit,' Graham's dad said to him.

Graham told me all about it. His mom died of cervical cancer, for real. Real cancer. She told Graham's dad she was sore, that sex hurt her insides. But he didn't believe her, he said she was

tryna trick him. He said the women must service the men. Still she complained, so he said, 'Fine, doll, you don't want it, I'll get myself a servant like my father.'

Graham said his grandpa was famous for it, even though Graham's granny was helluva churchy. She put on a sweet face while he slept with the natives. So Graham's dad threatened his mom with the same thing. She stuck it out, let him put it in. Carry on.

That's why he drank. Cause next minute she got galloping cancer and died. The old guy felt so guilty, Graham said. Got sloshed and remembered how she'd said it was sore, and how he'd said he'd get a Zulu girl instead. Funny, he drank to remember, not to forget. I know why, though. Cause if you take something to take the pain away, the truth's a breeze.

The next day when he was sober, Graham's dad said stuff like, 'Don't let them trick you. Keep them on a tight leash. Remember who's boss of the house.'

Graham was, like, eight or nine.

And when he was a teenager, his dad was a bitter old sod. Graham wasn't allowed friends cause big boys were too noisy. Graham had to put headphones on his Springbok Hits while his old dad watched sport, draining his spirit, smoking up a nicotine ceiling.

So Graham said he never, ever forced you to have sex with him, Ma. He said he didn't wanna be like his dad. He said sex was only for showing love. With us he called it 'making lush'. Sounded like grass cuttings from the lawn. If you put your hand in the pile it's hot and itchy, it makes its own sweat. Graham got so hot and trembly, making lush like the grass.

After the faithful sports ou, I get back into my white Greenpeace t-shirt and my pink skirt from Pep. I found it dirt cheap on the girl's rack. The rain takes a break, leaves a heavy, lead cloud on the mountain. Crispy Nora spots me turning the corner. She comes running, knobby bones covered in black rubber. A

wetsuit with neon yellow panels. High rubber collar around her skraal neck, holding up her perm. She's got no breasts, just a flat rubber chest. 'Tess, guess what happened?'

Not a disaster, cause I can see the filling in her eye tooth, and her brown eyes shoot sparks. 'Madeleine's husband came back yesterday.'

Happiness squeezes like a big fat hug.

'And guess what? He brought her daughter. The one from the war.'

The shock makes me wanna wee. My arms and legs go weak and silly, like it's me who got my daughter back.

'Wow.'

'Yesterday.'

Behind her, the string bean Buddha waits with his dog on a wind out leash. He's got a boogie board under his arm. Behind him, her boys carry one flipper each.

'I had the board, but Arch bought me this suit and some flippers.'

Nora's tripping on flippin life.

'That's a miracle,' I say.

But I mean about Madeleine.

Madeleine's got her daughter. Crispy's got a new rubber suit. I get Hanif.

When his van turns in, I jump in the bush. There where the No Dumping sign gives people the idea to dump their junk. Hanif circles the block. I stare at someone's old, brown flower bouquets, maybe from hospital. Dog shit, soggy from the rain. A ripped curtain, brick orange. A photo album, blonde girl on the cover. Safyr Bleu eyes, a white sun hat. The kind of picture that makes your family photos look ugly. I check inside. It's empty, ruined by water. I'm crouching among other people's waste, he gets out the bloody van.

'Tess!'

Like he's calling a lost dog.

'Tess, come out.'

I sit tight.

'Tess, I can see you.'

I stand up.

'What? I needed a leak.'

He won't come to the house, says it's too obvious. He bitches all the way about how it's a public holiday and he's got to work. He pats my knee. 'Same as you. But we've got to squeeze in some time to have fun.'

I stay hard as stone, 'Sorry to tell you, but this is work.'

He takes me into the graveyard on the M5. Not the nice grassy one I went to with Princess, the budget one in the dunes. I turn my back to him. It's bad enough his willy nudging the child, I don't wanna see his face. I hate him for not knowing, but I'd flippin kill to keep the secret. I face the grave of one of the guys who got killed for houses. That time some Vrygronders thought the others were creaming the housing money. This oke Billy whose grave we're parked on, maybe he was the one who was crossing the dunes in the dark. On the way to have supper with his mother, Annie said. They stabbed him in the heart, in the sand. Someone's left wild lavender and tiny pink fynbos flowers in a plastic Fanta Orange bottom. A wooden cross painted white. Hanif holds onto my stomach for grip. I pick his fingers off, push them away. How dare he.

Hanif leaves me with dead Billy.

There's a scrawny kid selling flowers at the entrance. The flowers cheer for the bloody rain, but the boy's pathetic in his black plastic bag, his hair all wet. A little packed lunch on a rock. He's playing with something inside a sack.

'What you got?'

He takes a long time to look at me, speaks slowly, still faraway.

'Sweetpeas, wisterias, ten rand a bunch.'

'No, man, in your sack.'

He grins. 'A Gameboy.' He checks around. 'I'm hiding it from the robbers.'

'Whoo-oo. Paying tax to the taxman, Tessa-tjie?' It's Keith, alone in the bushes. There's no sign of Aisha on the road. Only Natasha, doing hand signs, telling the traffic, Do a u-ey and give me a try.

'Where's Natasha's oke?' I ask.
 'Pollsmoor for housebreaking.'
 'Ha. Nice break for her.'
 'I'm gonna tell him.'
 'Tell him. Aisha on a jump?'
 'Uh-uh. I'm watching Natasha for Patrick now. You want me to watch you? You can make three times the marcha?'
 'No way.'
 As I walk away, Keith shouts, 'You must pasop on your own. The psychos'll get you.'
 I just keep walking. Natasha hardly ever talks to me, but as I pass her she says, 'You heard about Aisha?'
 'What.'
 Natasha's in red dungarees, you can't see how skinny she is.
 'Some ou burnt her tits.'
 'No-o, man!'
 'S'true. With a hot steel.'
 'No, man. God.'
 She undoes her dungaree strap, offers her whole breast to a white guy in a Venture. 'They caught the ou.'
 'What?'
 'Ja, there was a witness. But they let him go again.'
 'Why?'
 'He picked up Aisha and took her to his maats who were having a braai.'
 'Ag no, man.'
 'One of the maats couldn't take it. He told the cops. But the others all said they saw nothing. So the cops said, just lossit. Los the charge.'
 'Where's she now?'
 'Still in hospital.'
 'Ow.'
 'It was bad. But that one ou paid for a skin dinges. They cut some skin from her arse, here.' She slaps her skinny bum. 'She was lucky.'
 A spark in her eyes. The guy in the white Venture is back.

My skin suddenly feels helluva thin. I sit down on the pavement for a bit, the traffic barreling right through my brain. I sit there, my skin thin, thin. Thinking how they laid Aisha down at the braai. A winter burning. Spitting chops on the grill. Some pig branded her while she screamed. They must've had their music on high, maybe opened their car boots, opened the doors, tuned in to the same radio station.

Geez, I've gotto get cover from the cars, charging right through the bones of my skull. Voom. Voom. Missile flippin swipes.



Funny, Aisha's burning was a warning.

I go home early, only halfway through the day. Buy Portuguese sardines, personal avos. Walk the pavilion bridge. Think how I'd like to lie with my back in the sand. The cloud's got whiter, lighter, it filters the sun. Makes a wedding sun, you know, a yellow crêpe paper sun that tints white roses yellow. Turns blue stained glass into green. I remember that from your wedding, Ma. Even though I was only two. I was so glad Graham was gonna be my dad.

All I know about my real dad is what you told me, Ma. He was a pom. A clever pom, you said. Creative. Cruising through with his guitar. He wrote his own blues music. Touring faraway little places till he was ready to handle fame. Then he was gonna launch in London. At least you told me the truth, Ma. I'm glad you didn't lie. You watched him play at the Lark Inn at J-Bay. He was gone the next day in his red Combi, you said. About a month after the dry white made you bonk him on the rocks, he got caught in a rip tide and drowned. Somewhere near Mossel Bay. That's like, three hours from here. The same sea as this sea. I've got a granny in England, but she doesn't even know it.

I lock the gate cause I just wanna be alone and get my mind straight. Stop thinking all I've got is a kid they can rape. And a thin skin to burn. Hot metal burn like Aisha.

It's lucky I heard about Aisha. It's lucky I went home scared.
I'm halfway through the sardines when I hear someone shout,
'Tess! Tess!'

It's Josie.

'Tess!'

Shit. Leave me alone.

'Tessie!'

I can't resist. It's what Angie calls me.

Josie's upside down over the garden wall, her legs still on the other side. But suddenly her hanging grin's gone. I see her fright as she slides back, her fingers tryna grip the edge of the wall.

I rip open the gate.

It's Evil. He's got both arms round Josie, crunching her into a bundle. He kicks her into a black car. I grab for her, but the door slams on my fingers. Crack! I scream. The same sore fingers from Crispy's gate. He shoves me away, my fingers pull out. The driver's door is buckled from a crash, he's gotta go round to the other side. I try Josie's door. It's locked. I chase him, latch on. An elbow in the nose. Blood pours so red Ma, think of the red of Angie's rosettes. He opens the door, chucks himself in. I go in after him. Don't care. I chop him, chop him with my hands, I feel no pain.

His gun in my face.

'Get out.'

'Take me.'

'Voetsek.'

'Take me, rather.'

On the back seat, Josie's knees are up. Her arms over her face.

'Get out, I'll kill you.'

'No. No. No.'

He makes a promise. 'I'll take you. I'll take you and kill you.'

He drives. Ford Escort. One hand on the wheel. The gun in my armpit. I'm not moving. And I'm not leaving. That's all I know. He smashes the gears through the stop streets. Takes the corners wide. Blue lights, blue lights are all I wanna see. But there are only oranges for sale, the seller not looking. We grind through the orange light. We nearly crash at Sunrise circle, a lady in a

High Ace with a Twins On Board sticker. I try tell her with my face, Girl On Board. Gun In Armpit. But she's blind, still tryna shake off death. Josie's stopped crying, just sniffs wet. I wait for the gun to blast off my arm as we jerk, jolt, over a rough track into the bush. He lets the car stall. Climbs into the back, gun at my bleeding nose.

'Hold your hands out,' he says to Josie. He's calm, but his chest is rasping that mandrax rasp. 'Else I'll kill your ma's friend.'

This guy's an expert. Whips electrical cord round Josie's wrists. I wait, the gun like The Fly on my nose. He keeps his eyes on me, lies the gun on his lap while he ties some knots. Then rams Josie's lips with it, 'Give me your feet.'

She keeps her knees together, tight-tight, lifts her legs. He wraps cord round her ankles.

He puts his gun down again to tie the last knots. I dive for it, dive for his groin. But he catches my arms, knots them so they scream at the elbows. I'm so sore I can't breathe, but Josie screams for me. I get my foot to the hooter, a flippin contortionist. The hooter farts through the quiet, makes him crack, lose his temper. He chucks open my door, shoves me out. Lands on top of me. Kicks.

'Move it!'

I battle to get up. He kicks the back of my calves to get my legs to move. 'Move it, move it, vokken bitch.'

Gets me to a tree, the gun deep in my spine. He walks backwards to the car. Shouts, 'Move, I'll put a bullet in your back.'

He comes back with cord. Ties my hands the other side of the tree. 'White girl,' he growls. Comes up behind me. His teeth sink in, pop my flesh. I shriek as he bites my back open. 'Shut up, bitch,' he breaks into my skin again, bites through blood vessels, bites into muscle with his strong prison teeth. Cause the bad gangsters get mandrax and toothpaste, Ma, from the wardens.

No one can hear, the Port Jackson just sucks up my screaming. Just like Bonita, savaged by a hyena. I blubber into the bark,

terrified from caveman times, I swear. And from twenty years ago, Graham in my neck, showing his teeth, not biting, Just 'Nnnngh' from behind. Evil ties me to the tree, in case I run. But I wouldn't leave Josie. Never.

'Leave her, leave her,' I cry into the tree.

He puts the gun down. Rips my pink skirt. Does it from behind. Oh God. I cry into the tree as he splits the lining. Feels like a steel pole but it's only his penis, jamming, shredding. When I scream he hits me on the back of my head. Crunch of nose. More red to run. He grunts like a buffalo. Tears something there, cuts me up. My heart is chopped liver. I try make space for my belly. The baby, thrown against the windscreen, balled up, trusting me to live. Trusting me to keep her safe.

When he's grunted his sludge he wants to break me up more. I hear him stumble to the car. Roll my eyes to the side to watch. Pull back my hips to give the baby some space. He wipes his mouth, fixes his pants. The gun on the ground. When I see what he brings back from the boot I start groaning. The baby. She's dead. She's dead if he breaks up my brain with that Gorilla bar.

He swings the heavy metal. The sky falls on my head, I swear. Feels like bricks, the whole of False Bay Holiday. I go lights out. Wake up with him swinging it back up. But it doesn't come down. It can't cause there's a girl hanging on it. It's Josie, little thing, hanging on like it's rodeo. Her legs loose from the electrical cord. All stripey, her skin dented in red coils. She's screaming, 'Mamie, Mamie, Mamie,' like she's saving her own mom. He rips it away. She flies off, a striped cat, onto the dirt track. He hits her once, a bone breaking blow. She screams a sound that burns my brain shut, 'Mamie-e-e-e!'

I can't care anymore.

He lifts the bar, I hear him suck air.

'NO-O! NO-O!' It's me roaring. 'NO-O!'

He's gonna kill Josie.

You're never gonna believe this, Ma. It's like a movie on TV. I swear. This drumming comes from under the ground. Evil turns, brings the bar down sideways. Gets the side of Josie's head. Josie cries under the drumming. I think it's the blood in my head from the horror of Josie, but the earth is beating, closer, louder, drumming over Evil's screech. He sounds like a flippin woman. He slams into me, falls sideways. A huge, red beast passes. Something cuts like glass across my arm. The horse goes into a swerve. Her legs buckle, spray up white sand. But she springs back onto her legs, saliva shooting from her metal bit. Lennie rides. I swear. Lennie rides the red horse. I'm not lying hey, it's like a movie. He charges, pounds right over Evil, hammers him into the white sand. Reins tight down the sides of Pienkie's neck. Legs grown right into Pienkie's belly.

Evil's so sore he can't get up. He tries to crawl into the bush. He crawls, holding his ribs, but Lennie's got a whip. A Port Jackson branch, stripped off. Lennie grips on the mane, hangs right off. Whips Evil. Whips him. Makes Evil screech. Lennie herds Evil towards his car. Evil falls flat, but Lennie wheels the horse. The horse wild with flippin catastrophe. Blind, buckling on the corner again. Shoots her hooves after her head. Spit floats on the air. She pulps Evil so he bleeds somewhere in his face. Evil staggers back up, claws into the car.

Lennie stays on the horse.

He's hard on Josie. 'Untie Tess.'

'Mamieeee.'

'No mamie! Do it.'

Josie's sobbing.

'Don't cry now!'

Out the corner of my eye, I see white in the bush. It's the white mare from the day of the races. She watches with big, still eyes. Her baby snorts, backs into her. Except he's big now, her baby. Nearly her size. Josie lets her body fall onto mine. Presses her face into my back.

Lennie talks hard, 'Untie her, quickly.'

She puts her arms round the tree, tries to untie from this side.

'Go around!'

She looks into my eyes from the other side. Her ear's half hanging off.

'Tell him the gun's on the ground,' I say. 'Here behind me.'

She points, scared, like it might go off. 'The gun. The gun.'

Lennie sees it, but he's not gonna touch it.

'Thank you Josie,' I whisper while she battles with the knots.

'Thank you for saving me, baby.'

'Get to the road! Both of you!' Lennie's shit scared.

'Walk. Walk!' A hysterical trainer.

We stumble together towards the sound of cars. Follow the hoofprints in the sand. Relief like a beautiful, beautiful drug floods my womb. We walk, watch those prints, those small sinkholes bringing a weak man on a bad horse. Flippin weedy superhero.

I hold Josie's arm, like we're going down the aisle. Tryna think, is the baby breathing? Think, I've got blood for her, I've got food. Try remember my standard eight biology. I've got a heated pool. A life rope tied to her. Let her live, let her live.

Josie and me walk down the aisle.

A woman picks us up in a dark blue Audi. Knotty hair, big arthritis knuckles on the steering. A frown line between her eyes. I hold Josie's head against my chest, careful of her ear. I dunno why, but I say, 'We need to go to the sea.'

The woman's tryna stay calm, but she's hyperventilating.

'Okay ... I'll just get you somewhere safe first.' Buying time.

Her face nearly folded in half, down her frown line. She doesn't ask what happened. Just tells us she's on her way to swim at Fish Hoek. Burns up the tar. At the police station she gives me her old toweling robe. I walk into the charge office like a wornout housewife. Ragged robe and wounds to go with it. Josie bleeding down her neck. They radio Hanif's van, tell him where to find a horse, a gun, two men in the bush.

This big woman bursts in. Her fringe curled in. Her cheeks like two shining moons. 'Chantal Meyer,' she tells the whole station, 'Lennie's wife.'

The mother of mothers, I swear. She fills up the charge office, makes herself big. Fights for us. Her breasts float up, her arms lift at her sides, her black hair rises up out of her scalp. 'They must see the state doctor. You must take them in the van.'

Constable Chandler says, 'They can see Doctor Barnard around the corner. He'll come after hours.'

'No. They must see a special doctor. For the case. They must make a case.'

A sour white cop comes from inside. 'She's a prostitute.' I stare at him. Ja, he's the big boss. The station commander, tryna turf us out. Me shivering like I've been for a winter swim. Josie touching blood with a finger. Staring at it like it rained down from the roof. I keep squeezing her hard.

Chantal feels rocks for his rank. 'It's in the law. They must see a special doctor for the case.'

'Wynberg's the closest, if he's not off. It's Ascension Day.'

'Ascension Day?'

'Yes.'

'Tell that to the rapist.'

Chantal told me later she was busking it. She had no clue about the law. But she turns a key in the commander's tight little mind. He gets Constable Chandler to radio for an ambulance. They call the doctor from his nice braai.

The doctor smells of burnt meat. He's got a soft little beard that doesn't wanna grow. He's got dimples that have turned into ditches. And he can't see, can he, with those skew eyes? He pulls his white coat on, it's all scruffy at the sleeves. It's like this ou's just keeping the doctor's place till he comes. The nurse looks way too young to be working. A quiet black girl, like he's borrowed a child.

Cock Eyes thinks he's gonna examine Josie alone, but Chantal does her expanding thing, goes right in. I slip in behind her, my legs all trembly. Josie grips my robe. Cock Eyes asks Josie questions, shines a light in her eyes. Sticks a needle in a syringe. Chantal strokes the top of Josie's feet.

‘Think of your feet, girl. Don’t think of your ear.’

Josie goes, ‘Eeeeeee,’ all the way through, in waves. Going up in volume with each pulled stitch, softer as he clips the thread. Seven for Josie to sew her ear back.

Ten for my head.

The burning like petrol inside my flesh. The anesthetic runs out of the cut. I let the tears go. Let them free, quietly, while Cock Eyes is clipping, threading, tugging through burning petrol. Chantal rubs my feet hard. Josie hums to me. When Cock Eyes turns away to get something, I point at him, make both my eyes stare at my nose. Josie giggles, a bunch of silver bells bounces off the white walls.

I won’t take off my robe. Chantal makes me listen. Says, ‘To make a case. You must so you can make a case.’

Cock Eyes sends Josie out, pulls the curtain closed. Talks to Chantal like she’s my mother. Pulls in his spotlight. Presses my knees to the sides. Goes there where Evil just went. Collects fluid. Puts the sample out of sight. Another big needle, I go where it’s black, behind my eyelids. He sews up my bum. Sixteen stitches. I count the whipping pages of Josie’s book. Fast and violent, behind the curtain. The doctor draws a picture of the rip. Chantal helps me turn over. Points at my shoulders. Asks, ‘What about these?’

He stabs my skin, says it’s a tetanus shot. He draws pictures of the bite holes, the brand new bruises.

‘What about Aids?’

‘It takes six weeks to show.’

‘Can’t they test him?’

‘The court must order it.’

Chantal freaks, ‘That will take too long. She can’t wait like that.’

Chantal watches him stick a new needle in. Suck up my blood. It’s like she reads it there in my blood. ‘Isn’t there medicine that stops you from getting it?’

He nods. ‘Haart.’

‘What?’

‘Highly Active ARV Therapy.’

'Where's it?'

She looks around like she'll go fetch it herself. The doctor gets a little key from his top pocket. Leaves the nurse with my sucked up blood.

'You won't get Aids,' Chantal says while he's out.

I've got a flippin one woman party fighting for me.

He comes back with a little white box. Says, 'Every day for twenty eight days.'

Chantal asks, 'What are her chances?'

'If she didn't already have it, it will reduce the risk by eighty percent.'

I open the box, stare at the big pills in crinkly silver.

'Will they hurt my baby?'

'Where's your baby?' Chantal panics, like I've left it somewhere.

Josie sticks her head through the curtain. I point at my stomach.

Josie says, 'Junne!' just like her Ma.

Chantal's eyeballs go skew, thick silver beads hang off them. She sends Josie out. Cock Eyes goes where half of Cape Town's been. Does a whole examination. Eina it's sore, but Chantal squeezes my feet.

Baby. Aids. Rape. All those radio words.

She squeezes my feet and I try think of dancing on wood. Of drumming my feet hard, planting my feet deep. Making a hard, hollow beat. Drumming with my feet.

Cock Eyes buckles a band round my stomach. Switches on a hi fi. Dff-Dff-Dff-Dff.

'Oh. Oh. Oh.' Chantal sounds like she just fell from high up. 'It's the baby's heart.'

Cock Eyes nods. 'The baby's fine.'

The kid takes over the whole room. It drums, flippin loud and proud. I open my eyes, see a tiny twitch of the doctor's lips. Behind him, the young nurse looks excited, like she's never heard a heartbeat before. Me, I dance inside cause I haven't either.

And cause the bulge in the ceiling hides gorgeous gold, not rotten bodies.

Chantal puts both hands on my tummy, like she's tryna hold the kid. 'So can those pills harm the baby?'

Cock Eyes sighs, all sad, like his sausage and chops are ice cold. He opens the box and reads the paper. He shakes his head, 'Just a small chance of anemia in the newborn.'

Chantal rubs my tummy. Says to me, 'Make sure they check.'

Bonita comes sprinting down the ramp at the police station. She holds Josie for ages. Flip you wanna see a mother cry. She goes backwards up the ramp again, leads Josie up, eats her up with her eyes.

We tell Constable Chandler what Evil did. It's horrible, cause she can hardly write, I swear. I wanna rip the pen from her hand, write it quick-quick. I mean, she's a white chick. She must've gone to a good school. I hold Josie round the waist, rock us together, side to side. The sore, sore stitches help me not to freak. I've gotto keep calm for Josie, cause Bonita's a wreck. Now she's not scared of being shot. Now she's shit scared of the words coming out of us. Her eyes go big and blind, like all she can see is the bush.

'He raped my bum.'

Josie says, 'He slat me with a staal.'

We've got to go slowly. Geez. I wanna grab the pen, make flames with the ink. But for Josie, I rock, make burning pain. Wait for Chandler's brain to tell her hand to write the words.

Madeleine's door's wide open. She grabs my hand and sinks it deep in her breasts. Sharonne's inside with Madeleine's whole family. Madeleine's husband and Madeleine's lost daughter. Genevieve. Genevieve's got millions of rings, millions of bangles. Nothing round her neck. She's ugly. Geez. Light skinned like her dad, but she's full of yellow sores. Black scars. Her skin's patterned with disease, I swear, everywhere. She's got pink blotches of something, calamine, I think, on the wet sores. Silver paint messed on her fingers. Her hair's short and tufty. Madeleine's got her in a yellow dress full of ruffles. The

same fabric as one of Madeleine's skirts, that dark honey with pollen dust. Geez. Queen Honey. Genevieve's eyes are misty, you can't see in. And she smiles in all the wrong places.

Madeleine's husband doesn't smile. He's not sour, just tight. Noel's on his lap, so Honorius stands up with the boy stuck to him. Madeleine keeps my hand trapped in her heart. Grabs a fistful of her husband's sleeve. Hangs on, like she's scared he might fly. She talks to him, sweet, sweet. You can tell from her voice how precious he is. It's like he's her riches, her jewels. He's neat. Pleated pants and a clean checked shirt. One thing I like is how he keeps his eyes up. Never once checks out my body. I remember it Ma, cause that hardly ever happens with a man. He escorts us like a gentleman to my door. More sweet words from his wife. He goes off with Noel, leaves us to our woman's stuff.

Bonita's still staring, tryna get pictures of what Josie's seen. She flicks her teardrops with her knuckle, knows not to ask any questions yet. All of them fuss and brush us with their fingers. The last sunlight goes dim then bright, dim then bright as they flit across the flat. Run a bath, put on the kettle, come close to look at our stitches. Chantal says, 'He didn't even give you painkillers. Whose got ...?'

'No!' Madeleine stops her solid.

'Panado's fine for pregnancy,' Chantal says.

Bonita gasps, watches my eyes like news on TV. 'You pregnant?'

'Four months.'

'Junne.' More reason for her knuckles to flick, flick, flick.

Josie wants to stick with me, but Bonita pushes her gently into a warm bath. Behind Blu Bottle, the sea is innocent. Like it's got nothing to do with the cold winter wind. The thin new moon. The rape. It sings and rolls, like nothing's changed. Whistles its way to the bloody shore.

'I'm going for a swim.'

Madeleine's worried, 'I will take you to the shower.'

'I wanna go into the sea.'

Chantal talks like I'm not there. 'Does she always swim?'

I feel the movement of Madeleine's head.

'Tess, you mustn't wet your stitches.' It's the first time Chantal ever says my name. But I'm out the door.

A whole lot of them follow. Chantal punishes the stairs to catch up with me. Madeleine takes her lost daughter out for a walk. Chantal snorts, keeps up.

But I slow down soon, cause I'm sore. Madeleine's daughter flies past, excited about the tattoo shop. She stands amazed at the ring display. Earrings, tongue rings, God-knows-what rings. She bangs the glass, says something to Madeleine. She wants them, badly. Lucky the shop's closed. Madeleine tries to lead her away, but she slaps Madeleine off. Then she spots the tattoo shop man, drinking coffee across the street. Her toes don't touch the ground, I swear, as she runs over there. She steps over his dog, touches his metal ear tips, growls something. The ou's sweet though, he doesn't pull away. Lets her have his ears.

The boom's up. No train today. I cross the track, Chantal heavy next to me.

This weird relief. I'm on the right side now, the sea side.

The sea's calm tonight. Rolling, whistling, pure as anything. Some gulls fly straight lines along the slow running waves.

The sun's found a peephole on its way out. Lights a whole piece of sea from behind the mountain. I go in backwards, in my clothes. I lived in the sea when I was a kid. I swam every day until I was waterlogged. Before the horrible shadows, the warm Natal sea carried me safe, like a wild, moving womb.

I go into the white powder on the bank, the foam breaks right through me, stings my ribs. 'White girl,' he swore, chewed me with his white teeth. I bend my legs, sink down. The sea stings like Dettol, cleans his bites. I go under. Hot salt slashes at the cut in my head, but the sea holds my scalp, holds me cold, rinses my brain.

Something bumps against my head, something slides against my face. I shoot up, pull air. It's just a tube of kelp. Clumsy, the brown of a cow. Hooked to another one, like lost sea cattle. Chantal's brown legs grow on the sand bank. Her dress tucked into her panties. Arms folded across her big breasts. Watching. I step off the sand bank into the green of my veil. I remember how to swim. Circles, circles, my arms and legs glide the child, the water moving through me, washing away Evil.

Dff. Dff-Dff, Dff.

I feel the explosions in my womb. In my chest. In all my joints. The soft shock of faraway blasts. Muffled by a whole ocean, the navy are testing their guns.

There's a thin man standing with Chantal now. His arm around her. They're staring out to sea at me. It's Lennie. They wait till they see I'm swimming in the green along the bank, not into the blue. They walk back to the beach, sit on the sand. I wave. They wave back like flippin parents. Lennie's talking, talking, talking. Telling her the whole story I got later on.

The sea protects me and the baby, even from the war guns. That's when I make the promise. Okay, baby. No more shocks. No more beatings. No more jumps until you're born.

Genevieve's collecting something on the beach. I swear she's graceful as a ghost, like she's not really real. I know it's not shells. She's looking for bright things on the shore. Looking for what she lost when she was a kid. She gets peace from her bits and pieces, she gets off the planet. Like I did with my pills.

When she goes a bit far, Madeleine hurries to her, hovers. Genevieve shows her something. Madeleine lifts the girl's hand up closer to see, holds it like it's her own.

That's when I get the brainwave.

I need to tell them.

The sea lets me go, but chases me, playful.

Chantal sees me coming, trots up to some people, there near the toilets. A kid swoops down the silver slide, the mom clapping,

the dad catching. The mother stares at me, gives Chantal a towel.

Chantal wraps me up. Rubs me down. Gentle.

I need to tell them.

'We must all save up.'

They look at me funny.

'We must get Genevieve a metal detector.'



I get all the stories afterwards.

That day of Evil, Bonita came to visit with Josie. But Josie ran ahead. Bonita missed the whole drama, she was still round the corner, but Nora saw Evil pull off with us. Back from her surf with the boys, all proud in her wet rubber, maybe salt water still running from her nose. Nora raced up to Bonita, 'Does Tess have a coloured boyfriend?' She said me and Josie were in a black car. I was bleeding and we both looked upset.

Upset.

A professor of religion was vacuuming his car.

Bonita ordered, 'Get in. Drive. My daughter.'

He found himself with his foot down, Bonita digging into his arm, shouting, 'Drive! Drive!' when he was already driving.

Nora ran dripping to the cops. She was sharp enough to say, 'my friend' and 'a schoolgirl'. Not a prostitute and a prostitute's daughter.

They sent out a message. Hanif and Pretoria went hunting in their van.

Bonita made the professor swerve off the road. Asked Natasha if she'd seen us. Funny I didn't see Natasha, must've been when we nearly killed the Twins On Board. But Natasha saw Evil turn into Capricorn Park. Me in the front, she said, and some chick in the back. Bonita and her driver skidded into the stables, but the only sign of life was Lennie, busy with his little addiction, and a mounted policeman just dismounting. Bonita shouted

at the cop, 'He stole Josie and Tess! They're in the bush here somewhere!'

Bastard recognised her from the beach. Refused. Said he worked three times a week, eight till two. Not enough funds for full day, he said.

The professor started tuning him about moral duty. Lennie interrupted, 'Tess? Prostitute Tess?'

'And my Josie.' Bonita cracked then, started bawling.

Lennie spun in circles, battling to think. Then he pulled the bridle off the policeman's sweaty horse. Ran to the field. Stopped. Only to talk to the mad horse. When he tried to slip on the bridle, the horse launched at him. He roared one word, 'Pienkie!' and slammed the bit between her teeth. He dropped a gum pole down on one side and jumped on like a flippin Red Indian. Pienkie reversed into the fence, tryna get rid of Lennie, but he pushed that horse with his legs, pushed her forwards, straight into the bush. The white mare and her big boy came out of nowhere, along for the ride. So Lennie rode with a herd. He rode like a Red Indian, through the wild.

He broke his toe on me, that time he cut past me. The horse didn't touch me, not a hair, but Lennie's feet were turned out, pumping at the horse's belly.

After Lennie flattened Evil and sent me and Josie to the road, Lennie whipped the car. He whipped the roof to keep Evil in. Lennie said he was shit scared Evil would go for the gun. But he made Evil think he was some kind of flippin he-man on a steed. It helped that the horse broke nearly all of Evil's ribs and three of his front teeth.

Hanif and Pretoria were driving round blind till me and Josie got to the police. They told them on the radio exactly where to go. By the time those two cops arrived, Evil was homesick for prison. Lennie said it was dead easy to cuff him and get him in the van.

Lennie rode home on the horse. Across Prince George Drive, I swear, the other two horses following. He tried to chase them,

shouted, 'Go back!' but they ran through the traffic. Stuck to him out of horse loyalty. Lennie arrived home on a foaming, red mare. He waved the neighbourhood kids away, 'Watch out. She bites!'

Pienkie snatched at the kids like they were blades of grass, made them scream and scatter. The other two horses just dodged the kids, like they do in the Vrygrond. When Lennie reached his house, the white mare and her kid trotted past, tried out the neighbour's grass.

Chantal couldn't believe her eyes. Lennie was meant to be shit scared of horses. Pienkie pawed at their tiny square of grass, wanting to roll. Lennie dragged Pienkie's head up, shouted, 'Pienkie! Pienkie!' tryna stop her. Tryna tell Chantal about the attack. 'Please, Chantal. Go help them. Go up to Muizenberg police.'

The children watched, their fingers hooked in the fence. Went, 'Whoaa,' when Pienkie's legs buckled and she went down. Lennie went loose, rolled off slack, into the daisies. The horse grunted a whale grunt, balanced upside down on her spine, collapsed to one side. Back up on her spine. Another demolition thud. Drying her sweat on their only grass, her hooves loosening the half bricks at the edge.

Chantal could see Lennie was finished. 'I'm phoning your dad.'

'No ... phone my brother.'

Chantal left Lennie with the mad horse, came to find us. Lennie's brother came quick-quick. Thank God Lennie had firmed up by then, tied Pienkie to the fence. Damon was shocked by the story, but too cocky. He tried to take over and ride Pienkie back. He untied the reins, but Pienkie went for him like he was enemy number one. Lennie shouted, 'Watch out, she bites!' like a minute too late. Lucky Damien was fast, else he would've been eaten. Lennie stood on his post box, jumped on. The wrestler drove slowly next to Lennie and his herd, escorting them through the traffic. Bull neck, big arm out the window, his

hazard lights on. Big, brave brother, protecting Lennie with his brand new Tazz.

Okay, let me get this straight. After the police, Nora went to tell Red Scalp, that's Phyllis. Phyllis went to tell Madeleine and Madeleine went to tell Sharonne.

Sharonne was heating up spaghetti in the flat. She felt so shit later cause there she was, heating tinned spaghetti and singing.

'What were you singing?' Josie asked later.

'The Tide is High.'

'Atomic Kitten,' Josie said.

'It's old. It's a remix,' I said. But they weren't listening.

Graham used to love that Blondie chick.

Madeleine took Sharonne down to the studio. It was time for the first Mother City practice, the new Saturday afternoon class. But they didn't do belly. They lit candles for us in the day. They held hands and prayed. Phyllis said they lit all the candles and all the cats came.



I swear Draincleaner would be stoked, cause after Evil, I think I get filled with the Spirit. Maybe it was the women praying. Maybe it was the baby in my belly. I didn't know I was filled, till I find myself tryna teach Josie and Sharonne. Not with words. Just with peace.

Bonita comes home with a plug with two prongs, plus news from the police. 'No bail for Merrick. They're making him sit.' The girls check her out, confused. She says, 'He's locked up in Pollsmoor.'

Geez. We all lighten up. The girls play Musica's CDs nonstop. Chicks only. Avril Lavigne sings, like, The killing's over Ma, hide my guns and stuff, I'm heading one way to heaven.

I hang at the flat, trust Sharonne to feed the birds. I wanna be near Josie. Show her I'm fine. Show her I'm not a body. I don't

know what the hell I am, but you can kill me now and I'd still live. And I wanna show Sharonne it doesn't matter what her mother is. This flesh and blood stuff means sweet nothing. I wanna show them both that even if we died we'd still be alive. Do you get what I mean, Ma? If we died, I dunno for sure what would be left over, but when you see a dead bird or a dead fish on the beach you know there's still a ripple in the air, a flash of moving water that holds its place. I swear I believe in that Spirit now. It makes me wanna cry, I dunno why.

My love of belly starts after the attack. Josie and Sharonne help babysit Genevieve. Me and Madeleine go to an evening class. The stitches are out, but I'm careful with my wounds. Careful my brain doesn't unravel. I'm still a bit suspicious of dancing. Okay, it was the baby that whipped up all those dead memories, but I swear it was also the belly. It's gotta be good though, cause look at Phyllis. She's so flippin happy all the time. Now I wanna know why.

I ask Phyllis straight out, 'So what's the point of dancing if our bodies don't count?'

'To celebrate.'

'Celebrate what?'

'What we are.'

I know what's coming.

'The immortal, pure place inside us.' Then, you know what she says? She says words from inside my own head. 'We dance because no one can kill us. Not even ourselves.'

I get this magic feeling in my heart. I know all this from the rape. I ripen like a flippin avo. Little pipsqueak inside me gets bigger and bigger. I've still got twig legs, but now my thighs really touch at the top. I put an elastic on my jeans button. And I'm dead careful. Protect the kid from jolts. I stick to my word, the road is history. Geez, I'm even careful of shopping trolleys coming too close. I grind away at redskin nuts in the loft, a pregnant ape. Ask the girls, 'Have I got skins between my teeth?'

They check my teeth, all serious. Show me exactly where. Bonita grills snoek with apricot jam in Madeleine's oven, cause I'm five

months, but frying makes me feel naar. I think it's cause of the Haart pills, the one's I've gotto take for Aids.

And it rains avos, you won't believe it. I dunno if it's just because of Evil, but Hanif delivers a whole crate to the flat. A yellow plastic crate packed with live green things, pregnant bloody ovals from an old, dead guy. Hanif stands on the pavement at False Bay Holiday, tells us this old guy was up his ladder picking avos and he had a heart attack. When they got there, the old wife was lying outside with the corpse, staring up at the avos. She wouldn't let the ambulance take him, kept saying, 'The pears are ripe. The pears are ripe.'

Hanif and the Pretoria policeman had to pick the avos so she'd let the body go. Her friend fetched her, took some of the avos for grief on toast. The rest Hanif's tryna find a home for. Ha. Hanif drops avos off for his daughter. And he doesn't even know it.

A few days later, I swear, there's a ripping whistle from the street. I know it. It's him.

It's Athol.

Kempton's Hire. A film crew truck. A no hands cell set on his head. Belts and buckles, pouches everywhere. Tells me he's the props manager on some movie. 'I came to bring you avos.'

Fingerless gloves, leather. A flippin high tech slave.

'Why?'

No sign of a sorry.

'They're from the market scene.'

He unlocks the back. The truck stinks of dope.

'What movie?'

A bad tempered boy in the back. Boxes of shining avos stacked like pregnant emeralds. Skin begging to split. Give creamy green meat.

He won't answer straight. 'It's a TV movie.'

'I gave *your* TV to the beach preacher.'

He goes tense, stares at the sea between Blu Bottle and the station subway. Says, 'We want to go straight to the wrap party.'

'I'll take a few.'

Unloads six boxes onto the pavement. We call Henrique, Marie the car guard and Honorius. We lug six boxes up the stairs. As Athol goes, I swear, he gives me a sorry look. And when I crack a smile, some part of him flies up. I can nearly see it, it's like a quiver in the air. I also see the sign stuck to the side of the cab with masking tape. 'Snow White.'

A box for everyone. Bloody food aid. Avo on white toast, up on the balcony. I'm balancing on my broken wall, and some avo falls off my slice. A seagull swipes down, gets it before it hits the tar.

'Sheez.'

'They even eat twenty cent pieces,' says Sharonne.

'How d'you know?'

Sharonne busts Josie with her eyes. Josie blushes.

'Sis, Josie, man.' I don't smile. Feel sorry for the seagulls who swallowed her coins.

Bonita makes money for us. The kids go to school, I hang next door with Madeleine and them. Wait for the first, half useless Aids results. When Josie comes home, I start telling her with words. About how there's something in us he couldn't kill. How cool she was to hang on the Gorilla bar. She says, 'I never ever want to have sex.'

'That wasn't sex, Josie. That was evil.'

'I don't ever want a boy to stick his thing ...' She presses her eyes like she's tryna make the picture disappear.

'Sex feels nice if you love someone.' I'm making stuff up. Sex's always been flippin guilty. 'Sex's for showing love.' I grab out of thin air, 'Like me and Athol.'

'Snow White?'

'Ja.'

I only really get it when I tell Josie, 'We loved each other.'

Sheez, that puts me on a high. You see, I have had a real relationship.

Josie wet her bed twice, dreaming Evil's after her. Bonita and me get all stressed, then I get a brainwave. I take Josie with me, go feed the birds. We go into the cage, let the birds fly around. I

tell her how I started weeing cause I was scared. Then I stopped weeing cause I was scared. I told her how you scared me on purpose Ma, saying the birds would fly in. But now I'm *not* scared anymore. Now I cry from my eyes if I need to. I make it into a joke. She laughs at me saying all this crazy stuff, standing there with the little birds brushing me with their wing tips, ag, like kisses. Gentle as anything, nothing like Lennie's toenail. We fetch Lennie's horse from the floor of the cage. Wash off the finch shit. I tell Josie it's the same horse that saved her. So she sleeps with it and now she's nice and dry at night.

One morning Josie's making bompies with Madeleine. I'm painting Genevieve's nails silver with this polish her dad bought at Joburg station. Geez, she made a mess of her nails on the train. Henrique shouts, 'Tessie, phone!'

Everyone calls me Tessie now.

Genevieve follows me to the phone. Waits with the silver polish.

'Tess, I've called so many times.'

I nearly die. It's Dumi.

'No one told me.'

'I've phoned about five times. I got your number from Angie. Well, first I found your mom, then she gave me Angie's number.'

'You phoned my mom?'

'Yes. But she didn't know anything about you.'

An ugly scoff comes up, 'She doesn't.'

'So ...'

He's stuck. Genevieve gives up on me. Stands there painting her own nails. Silver all over her fingers again.

'So ... what did my mom say?'

'Well, *she* asked *me* about you.'

'So what did you say?'

'What could I say except that you're still in Cape Town, and working as a dancer.'

'What did she say?'

'She said ...'

'What?'

'She said you're probably a stripper.'
 Pain volts through me, into the concrete floor. I wanna chuck
 the phone down. 'I'm a prostitute.'
 Silence.
 I hang up the phone.
 But the pain moves back up from the floor, forces my arm up. I
 pick the phone up.
 'Tess?'
 'Dumi?'
 'Yes.'
 'I *was* a prostitute.'
 'Okay. It's okay.'
 'Now I'm pregnant.'
 'Is that good?'
 'Yes. Yes.' Pride rides in my voice. 'It's coming in October.'
 'Hey, maybe on my birthday.'
 He flippin ties himself in, just like that. It gets worse. He says,
 'Your birthday's in ... three week's time.'
 I lose my breath. 'How the hell do you remember?'
 'Hey, man. Like I said ...'
 That best friend thing whispers between us.
 'Can I help you?'
 I think he means bucks.
 'I mean, do you need a place to stay?'
 I'm so flippin thrown I can't think straight. I just say lots and
 lots of no's.
 'No, no, I'm okay.'
 'I've got a big flat in Kloof Street ...'
 'No, no, I've got a place.'
 'I can help you ...'
 'No, no I'm fine.'
 'Can I come and see you?'
 'No!'
 Genevieve gets upset, squeezes me, stains me with flippin
 silver.
 Softer, 'It's really fine, thanks.'
 He's still tryna say, 'But ... but ...' Saying he wants to come see
 me. I block him with, 'Thank you, bye, thank you, bye.' I get rid

of him, but I'm amazed at my own sweet voice, my own sweet feeling.

At the flat, Josie's in the middle of bompies. She's staring at the TV, horror in her eyes. It's a music video, this chick going down on a guy, jerking her hips to the drum beat. I snap the TV off. 'Don't worry Josie. Sex is for love, not for sport. Don't worry so much.'

Lennie's Chantal drives me and Josie to Simonstown. Bonita comes as a flippin nervous bodyguard. We go see Sonya, this lady from Legal Aid. She's a small blonde chick with a high, high voice. But she knows her stuff. She looks at me. 'We don't know yet what he is going to plead. If he pleads not guilty, it has to go to trial. And I'm afraid in this country, women still have to prove that they didn't ask to be raped. It's ancient old law from nineteen voetsek. I'm afraid you have to appear with the perpetrator in the same room and describe exactly what he did to you.'

Bonita shouts, 'No, no, she's a child!'

I keep shaking my head. Sonya puts up a little hand. 'Sorry. Not the children. At least we have made progress there.' Bonita sits shivering a bit. Sonya rattles off about how if it goes to court, Josie can sit in a separate room. They'll get a social worker to ask her the judge's questions and tell the answers to a camera. It'll be like Josie's there, but she's not.

Bonita's starts breathing out again. Me, I'm miserable, my new scar starts hurting on that hard chair.

'Unfortunately ...' Sonya says. We all tense up. 'If it goes to trial, they'll need DNA results. And the forensic lab is so overloaded, it's going to take about a year to get them.'

Chantal blows up, 'A year! They can't wait ...'

Sonya stops her with her soft hand. 'The time might work for us. There are two factors that might persuade ...' She looks down for his name. 'Evil,' I say. Josie giggles. Sonya wants to smile, '... Merrick, to plead guilty and avoid a trial.'

She says Merrick's skipped bail for some other assault, so he's already in shit. 'We can offer to soften his sentence for breaching bail.'

'Huh?' Bonita doesn't get it.

'We can say to him, plead guilty to the rape and we will cut you some slack.'

The room freezes up, big time. Sonya ignores it. Says, 'His other incentive is that if he pleads guilty now, he can start serving his jail sentence immediately. If he waits for the DNA and the court case, he'll sit for two years before ...'

Bonita freaks out, 'Two years! Are they mad? How can they make us wait like that?'

Two years with Merrick in my mind.

Oh, God.

Sonya's like a nice receptionist with a stupid boss. 'I'm so sorry that the justice system is so congested.' She says to me, 'I'm really very sorry,' like she knows how horrible it all was, never mind I was a prostitute.



A bit after that, Hanif catches me when I'm crossing the park. Follows me down the bank but can't stop at the bottom. I laugh at him bending back, digging into the lawn with his shiny cop shoes. He's all kind, like I'm human now. Like it's not my job to be raped. He says he reckons Merrick's bugged cause of all the witnesses, plus he's got no chance with the doctor's report. 'My guess is that he'll plead guilty.'

Like I even asked what he thinks.

'He's one of those dangerous ones who doesn't mind prison. It's kak, but it's easier than hustling on the street.' Then he tells me, quiet, like the geezers from the bowling club have got supersonic ears, 'You're supposed to hear it from the doctor. He wants to see you on Tuesday for Aids counseling. They tested Merrick.'

I know it before he says it.

'He's positive. But I saw the form. You and the baby are negative so far.' His eyes burn with his own strange hope.

I feel the grass blades through my sandals. The ground pushes up, my nerves count the flippin air molecules. 'Jesus.'

Salt air fills up my lungs. I let some out. 'So far.'

He nods.

'Merrick's positive?' I ask, still tryna understand.

He nods again.

I say it like a fact, sure as that flippin mountain. 'We are negative.'

Hanif glances at my little tummy. Fiddles with the stud on his holster.

'I can take you on Tuesday.'

I stare at him till he gets blood in his cheeks and frowns down at Randall and Muffy outside Blu Bottle, bergies kissing drunk.

'No, don't worry.'

The bastard's guessed it's his baby.

Annie phoned when I was out. Marie the car guard wrote 'Annee' and a Joburg number on the back of a match box. I'll call back later when I've got some change. Me and Josie go feed the birds. We sit still as statues on the back stoep, watch the wild birds. 'They want to be in the cage,' she says.

'Why?'

'I think they want a home.'

I hug her tight, give her some of Darryl's peanut butter on a spoon. But it gets me fretting. What am I gonna do with the baby? I don't have a home.

I'm a ragged gull, not a flippin tame finch.

Next day, I'm in Shoprite. I see a girl with smooth, creamy knees and one of those vests with a built in bra. Looks like Muizenberg's turning yuppie. She's got a thin gold chain round her neck. Bright eyes and proper highlights. Pushing a trolley in square office heels. Round calves from ballet or those step up things at the gym. In her trolley, I swear, car wax. Fresh orange juice with real fruit cells. A bunch of real coriander and a new photo album with a parrot on the cover. The only thing missing is popup tissues. I bet she's got a nice boyfriend who's got lots of clean, white socks. Maybe he calls her Love. Me, I live with

the starlings, cormorants, the geese from Egypt. Gulls from the sea. All of them tough. Loud, with slang and bad accents. They fight for old bait, scream like bergies for bits of bread. Swallow coins by accident. I fret about Josie, what she said. Kids need a home. They need cleaning and feeding. A nice, safe cage. And I'm more of a gull than a finch.

I tell Madeleine I'll meet her down at belly. I go early on purpose.

When Phyllis sees me, she chucks up her hands. 'Thank you,' she says, to no one. Dead glad to see me. We go through the kitchen, past lentils and tomatoes bubbling in a pot. Past a door with the cute tennis coach lying on a couch. I wave, but my timing's way out. The TV goes, 'In this wind he's going to have to drive hard to get it on the green.'

In the courtyard the tinkle of falling water hushes the TV. The mosaic I always see through the door is a pottery cat, shattered and stuck together again. A normal old house cat with fluff on its chin, washing itself with a paw. A bird brushes the cat with pure white wings. Either a very slack cat or a very dumb bird.

'Your name's not on the list. Are you dancing in the Mother City? We're getting five hundred rand each.' Geez, she must be used to doing deals with God.

I look down at my belly. 'It'll be big.'

'It will be beautiful. It will show everyone what belly dancing's about.'

I nod, wings in my tummy. 'Okay.'

'Hallelujah!' But she says it like an unholy person, no chance of dipping into the fountain and baptising me.

'Sheez, I'm nervous already.'

She hugs me, laughing. 'To dance? After what you've been through?'

'Phyllis?'

She goes quiet, like she's been waiting.

'What am I gonna do with this baby?'

She says words so strange then, it's like they're not really English.

'You will do the right thing.'

'And what must I do with my past?'

Phyllis waits like she's listening to God or someone. 'You didn't know what you were. That's why you're here.'

'Where?'

She smiles, 'On earth.'

I frown. She says things I know from deep in my brain. 'You're here to remember that you're part of God. His holy daughter.'

Tears flippin ambush me, jump out before I can stop them. Graham didn't treat me holy. Nor the men who rented me. Hit me, kicked me, bit me.

Phyllis slides close, tucks me under her arm. 'Your Madeleine taught me that. You can't leave God, even if you try. When I was still in the order she looked at my habit and she saw Christian judgment. She could hardly speak English then, but Madeleine said to me that if she had to kill me right then, God would ignore her sin. Oh, she made me scared.'

A scared Phyllis makes me giggle.

'I watched her carefully.' Phyllis laughs with me. A huge tabby jumps on the wall. Sits close, acts cool. 'Madeleine has seen terrible things. It is as if she died in that country and saw the truth.'

I dunno why, but I think of you then, Ma, looking for truth in your horror novels.

Phyllis strokes the cool cat. It arches its neck, lifts up into her touch. I try tell Phyllis about Graham. I tell her about Graham's dad and Graham's mom. And you, who loved dying. But I can't go all the way. I say, 'He didn't wanna be like his dad.' I take a deep breath. 'He didn't wanna force my mom to have sex.' It's as close I'm gonna get, but the truth twists my voice, leaks out.

Phyllis lets Graham's story hang there, the water rinsing and rinsing over and over. After a while she says, 'He made a terrible, terrible mistake.'

But something in me stays rock hard. All my life a flippin sex toy.

'Tess, only a deluded person would hurt a child. Someone who believes he is human refuse.'

My whole flippin life.

Phyllis keeps talking, gentle, 'But you're lucky, my love. You know what you are now.'

The water behind us listening, rinsing.

'Now you can laugh.' Phyllis smiles. 'It's madness, this place.'

I croak, 'What place?'

She smiles. 'This earth.'

Geez.

Then Phyllis tells me her worst, worst story, and all I wanna do is laugh. She says, 'My awakening also came through a bad man.' There in her tinkling courtyard with cats sliding over the tiles. A white kitten bouncing on straight legs, Phyllis gives me her whole, long, near death story. She was driving a whole herd of lawnmowers on the back of a truck to the Catholic Institute. They had, like runways of grass and the nuns, I swear, had to keep it slick. I can just see bits of grass hanging off their eyebrows, making them itchy under their habits, staining their veils. Passing each other, maybe rolling their eyes, as they march down the grass. Anyway, a tyre burst on the truck and Phyllis didn't have her seat belt on. She went straight through the windscreen and got chucked far from the truck. She ended up in a ditch, on her back. Paralysed.

Some little kids arrived but they didn't see Phyllis, so they pulled the cords on the mowers and rode off into the bloody sunset. The funny go carts caught the eye of this guy going past. He hung over Phyllis. A bad haircut she says, a big red face, hanging over her.

'I think I've broken my back,' she whispered.

I'm waiting for a rape or something, but no. Phyllis says this oke called for help on his cell. Told them there's a nun in a ditch with a broken back. Then he tuned her, 'Sorry, but I'm taking the last four mowers. My garden service went bang last year. I need them,' he said, 'to start up again.'

'I was saved by a lawnmower thief,' Phyllis says, some giggles popping in her.

I laugh like hell. Geez. Hide your daughters from the bad, bad man. She's clueless about misery, this chick. A real sheltered

kid. I mean, her lawnmower man's a hundred percent honey compared to Graham. Or Merrick.

She says she got Madeleine's whole meaning when she was lying in the ditch. She says she started laughing inside. She couldn't laugh out loud, cause of her broken back, but she says she laughed deep inside about her whole life. How she gave up dancing to become a nun. How she battled at the convent, so stiff, so still. Fighting nasty thoughts out of her head. Thoughts of slapping, kicking, spitting on the sisters in charge. Lekker violent thoughts. Then she crashed the truck and her disaster was a miracle for some oke. She lay there with a split in her spine and saw that everything was just flippin funny. She looked up at the sky and she saw the world was swirling and rushing and dripping.

'Do you know what the element of the belly chakra is?'

'Uh-uh.'

'Water.'

'I saw the whole world was fluid, not solid. And there were no spaces between anything.'

Phyllis had a huge back op. They welded bones together so she can't do back bends. But she can do what she likes with her hips. She says she danced to get strong. And to say no to the whole sin thing. She danced to say stuff off with her hips.

'I saw how people hate themselves, so what do they do? They attack. It's insane! The truth is, we are made of love.'

I think hard. Some hope dances in me. I notice that someone's painted ivory light between the blades of the suicide gull.

'So what's not crazy?'

'The only sane thing is our souls. We can check with the love in us, ask, what am I? What must I do?'

I see what she's tryna say. The soul is real. The rest is dicey.

'Our souls always know.'

'What?'

She stands up, strokes my head like she's tryna iron me smooth. She keeps talking, keeps stroking my crazy brain. 'To see through sin. To work for love. I left the convent because I wanted to see

love working between people. Not just feel it in the damn air around me when I prayed.'

When she talks about love I know it's the silk of the veil kind of love, not the fanny. I tease her cause I'm shy, 'And mess around with a tennis coach.' She laughs hard enough to crack the concrete banks of her water feature. She lifts praying hands to the sky. 'Thank God I found out that sex is to celebrate.'

Geez, any excuse to celebrate with this chick.

In the dance class we work on a fast drumming piece for the concert. We leave our veils on the floor, tuck our t-shirts in our bras. Work on pure technique. It's hard, it's hectic, tryna get our movements sharp. We drum with our bones, every beat a blow. Camel walks, up-drop-up. Figure of eights, drop-drop-drop. With our hips, shik, shik, whiplash, whip. When we're wet with sweat, sticking our fingers in the stitches in our ribs, Phyllis says, 'Okay, we're going to go slow. We'll start with our arms and bring in some veils ... Remember, move from the breast bone, keep your arms light.'

I'm like a skollie bird, Ma. But just put me in the air. Look straight up, as I fly over. My whiteness will stun you. You won't believe your eyes when you see my wingspan. You'll think, I never knew.

I'll glide right over your head and you'll see my virgin belly. Its softness will take your breath away.

'Stretch your wings,' says Phyllis, 'through the walls.'

It's my soul you'll see when you see my wingspan and you'll think, I never knew.



I call the number Annie left. She thanks me a hundred times for looking after the finches. 'We're coming home soon. Nou's ek homesick!'

It's me she's missing, cause I can feel a knot pulling in my own heart. I tell her the whole deal. Talk fast cause the phone time's ticking.

'I'm pregnant. I've given up sex work. I'm gonna dance full time.'

'Vok!' She's blown away. 'Hemel. You keeping it?'

'Ja.'

'Vok. I wanna see you dance.'

That Sunday, Avril's singing cheeky, like, If you try build a wall, I'll just grow up tall, if you try and trap me, I'll run till I'm free, and the phone rings for me. This time it's Angie. For real. Joy rips through my body, shreds me right there.

'Happy Birthday.'

'What?'

'Don't tell me you forgot.'

I can only stand there and laugh. My faraway sister more switched on than me. 'I've just been really busy.'

Angie's all nervous, asks like she doesn't wanna know. 'With what?'

'Rehearsing. I'm dancing in a concert.'

'Oh.' Angie's voice is all thin, like she doesn't believe me.

It starts sounding like a lie, even to me.

Ange strikes me down, just by being nice.

In the flat, I swear, Avril sings about brothers and sisters. How they should stick together, tell the world to go jump. I switch her off, say, 'I just wanna listen to the radio for a bit.'

But it doesn't help. The radio says it's freedom day in America. The fourth of July, more reasons to bomb the Arabs. More reason for Angie to think I'm a rubbish.

I don't wanna be in the world.

I hate this place. This world just hurts.

I try it then. What Phyllis said. I try take a quick trip to my soul.

I ask, 'What must I do?'

Shit, it's dangerous, cause I end up blurting, 'It's my birthday.'

Everyone goes dead quiet, then screeches in panic. They come kiss me, the girls and Bonita. Clumsy hugs.

Damn Angie for not believing.

Next thing I say, 'I'm gonna make us all pancakes.'

There's half a bag of flour. Behind me, Bonita gets into a flap. Chucks stuff out of a handbag, sends words out the side of her mouth. Sharonne runs out, comes back, something stuffed in her pocket. The girls go, 'Ssh. Ssh,' behind me. Josie blocks out Sharonne while Sharonne rolls something in a scrap of Madeleine's purple cloth.

I open it slowly.

'Wow.' It's called Princess Grace. I spray some on my wrists. It smells like toilet spray. 'Lovely.'

I go up to Princess, who's got a black Bad Boy cap on her head. Put my wrist to her nose, make the girls laugh. The other present is bright red lipstick. Brand new. Sharonne says, 'From the factory shop. Ma wouldn't let me wear it.'

'Too red.' Bonita gives me the eye to get her meaning. 'But it's fine for you.'

Sharonne gets all jumpy, tryna cover up. 'Because you're grown up and you're blonde.'

That's when it hits me, shit. Sharonne knows I'm the same as her Ma.

'Thanks, man.'

Josie bosses me, tells me how to hold my mouth. Plasters me with lipstick. Next minute Madeleine comes in holding up little white things. 'Happy Birthday Tessie!'

Black eyes stuck on tiny velvet baby booties.

'I was keeping them, but you must have them now.'

'Aah, cuuute!' Josie's in love, but flippin fear bangs my chest. The black eyeballs roll as I nip the booties with my fingertips. 'Thank you,' floats somewhere in the air. I drop them on the trunk. No one dares touch them.

We eat my pancakes with sugar. We leave the booties with their rolling eyes, go work the Sunday market. I sit with the rows and rows of sunglasses that Honorius bought home with his daughter. Madeleine's relaxed enough now to let Genevieve go with me. She and Honorius are helping a friend move. The sun breaks out the clouds, squeals as it hits my red lips, probably. I wear a pair of the darkest, darkest shades. I think I'm hiding,

but my lipstick's a big stop sign. Middle of winter and everyone stops to try glasses. Whities ask me about UV protection. 'Hey they're twenty bucks. If you sit on them, it's no loss.' Funny, it works. They sell just as well as the calamari rings down the drag. I haven't even got time to wipe greasy fingerprints off the shades.

The girls leave all the bloody work to me. Sharonne cruises past with her surfer boy. They try on a hundred pairs. 'You look so cool,' she says to him. He says, 'You look so hot.'

Genevieve's no hassle. She doesn't move from the jewellery stall next door. She holds up a necklace to the sun, lets it spin. What's she seeing, stars in the day? I give Sharonne some money from the kitty. 'Buy it for her.'

Josie buys pineapple rolled in curry spice. I'm busy as shit but I watch her like a hawk. She bites into it, sunny yellow wedge stabbed on a sosatie stick, dusted with curry dust. I'm laughing at her scrunching her face up from the acid, when I feel the karate kick.

One quick little kick, Wham! into the wall of my womb.

The whole market goes silent, I swear. Just the sea and wash of water in my womb.

Someone's holding out notes and silvers.

'Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God ...' I sound like a bloody American. The person pulls their hand back like a shot. I hold my tummy. Genevieve's the closest. 'Baby.' I point at my stomach. 'Baby.' Show her a karate kick. Josie comes to see what's happening. I tell her the baby kicked. She runs off to find Sharonne in the crowd, but I grab her, haul her back. 'Uh-uh. Stay where I can see you.'

She puts her hand there. There's a kind of tightness, like it's bunching up for another kick. But it relaxes, all innocent. Josie gets bored, but I hold her hand tight. 'Wait, wait.'

This kid's for real. Knocking at the door.

Oh my God.

Waiting like that, listening, I ask, 'What must I do?'

You'll never believe the relief. You'll never believe the birds in my heart, thrashing. Flying bursts, right inside. On my birthday, Ma.

Mom, you'll never believe how amazing it feels when they get in.

I sweep the shades off the table, into the bag. 'Come, come. We've gotto go.'

We jump into a taxi, me, Josie and Genevieve. With a striped refugee bag of glasses you can sit on. We get out near the Military Road lights. Some big kids on BMXs take us all the way to the house.

Chantal's there, gutting snoek in the garden. There where the horse rolled, I suppose. Long silver beauties, on newspaper. Glittering scales stick on the paper, sparkle on the grass. Their eyes still seeing water rushing past. Chantal's slicing one down its spine with a flippin killer knife. Cats on her roof, crouched for a piece of the sea. She hugs me, her hands bloody like a surgeon's. A couple of fish scales flash on her face. When she goes to hug Josie, Josie ducks. She's spotted some horses in the window, nose to tail on the sill. She goes inside. I go try call her out cause she's not invited, but Chantal says, 'It's alright, it's alright.'

On top of their TV I see a flippin fantastic copy of Chantal. Hands on her knees, breasts hanging inside her dress. Feet planted. Humongous legs. Watching, like that time I went swimming. He made her a bodyguard or a bouncer. Guarding something, you know? A protector with a beautiful big bum.

Josie starts up a herd of Lennie's horses on the coffee table. Outside, Genevieve piles some copper coins on the fence pole. Doesn't even glance at the kids who hang on their bikes, tryna figure us all out. I go watch Chantal, say, 'Carry on. Don't worry.'

She laughs at the roof. 'I have to finish because of the cats.'

She strips the stomach out the snoek. Gentle and smooth, like the fish can feel. Makes a nice pile of red insides. She slits the thin meat at the tail, finds the spine. I speak softly, so the BMX

kids can't hear. 'I just came to ask, maybe you want my baby. You and Lennie.'

The knife stops cutting.

'I can't look after her, and you guys ... I trust you guys. You can have her forever. I just can't look after her, I know I'll make a stuff up.'

Chantal stares like she can see under the sea.

'She hasn't got Aids. I know she hasn't got Aids. The only thing is, I don't know what colour she'll come out. But the father is a good man, I promise. He's good.'

Chantal sinks onto her bum, next to the cut open fish, their insides in a pile, their sides smooth and white. She wipes her forehead, the bloody knife in her fingers. Her tears mix with the scales on her face. I dunno why she's crying till she smiles at me through water, smiles like I'm a true blue angel. A good wife she says, 'I'll talk to Lennie.'

Does she feed us that day! Us three pig out on bobotie with yellow rice and raisins. Then killer koeksusters, crispy, dripping syrup. Coffee. She tries to fatten the baby up in an hour. I do the karate kick for Chantal. She laughs, but it's a silly, sobbing laugh. She can't stop staring at my stomach. I think Genevieve gets it only then, cause she keeps tryna rub my tummy in circles. But she's got too many rings and they scrape my skin, so I tell her, 'Gently.'

We're all hyped on the way back. We groove together in the taxi.



Next day Chantal and Lennie come to the flat to say, Yes, Yes, Yes! Lennie's on my balcony wall, wringing his hands with gladness. Chantal sits up against me, ready to protect me from falling planes or something. They didn't sleep last night, they say. But I swear the two of them have got flippin fireworks in their eyes. They'll take her if she hasn't got Aids. I tell them,

'Don't worry, I dunno why, but I know we didn't get it. It's just a miracle.'

Chantal says, 'But you will ...'

'Ja, I'll do the second test.' I count on my fingers. 'Next month.' They're dead, dead glad when I say we'll have to do a contract to make them feel safe. Lennie says quickly, 'Damien's lawyer can do it.'

It was already sorted in the middle of the night.

It was meant to happen, I swear. Nearly everyone's glad. I tell them the whole story, I go, 'They've been trying for years and they really deserve a kid. I can't keep it safe, I can't.' Madeleine nods, stares with her burnt eyes, tryna see behind my words.

'I'm getting it together but I still don't know if I'm coming or going.' Madeleine gets my arm in a Chinese bangle, 'You are going?'

'No, no.' I point at my brain. 'Up here.'

'Ohh.' She nearly chews me up with her smile.

The girls are the only ones who get upset.

'Aah ... Why?' Josie looks like she might cry. Sharonne glances at Josie, thinks quick. 'Can we visit?'

Josie looks up all hopeful, like she was with the birds.

'Um ... I'll ask. I'm sure they'll say yes.'

'Ja. Because we'll be like sisters,' says Josie.

Shame. I think cause their dad's got new kids that they've never met.

Bonita just says, 'Good, Tess. That's good.'

'Why, good?'

The girls are listening. Bonita just shrugs. But she sticks her head through the bathroom door when I'm sitting down to wee. Whispers, 'I don't want you to struggle. It's not lekker being a single mother.'

Phyllis comes up to me at the back of the class. Says quietly, 'I hope you're not giving up this child because your own mother didn't do a good job.'

'Huh?'

'Perhaps you are still angry with your mother.'

I shake my head. 'All I know is, I can't handle a kid.'

She reaches up, rubs the lobes of my ears like she's feeling for truth. She smiles. 'I understand,' she says, and shuts up.

Mom, I go the way my soul says. And my whole life just turns on its head.

Chantal and Lennie ask me to move in. They wanna help me, keep me safe. I tell them not yet. I say I've still gotto look after the birds. And I've gotto practise for the Mother City. But Chantal says please, she wants me close. Says she needs help with her catering, she'll pay me. So I tell her I'll come in the mornings, help her in the kitchen. Afternoons I'll sew with Madeleine. Suresh from belly, her sister's getting married. Madeleine's got a whole lot of silky saris to sew. I tell Chantal don't worry, I'll come stay after the Mother City concert. 'So you and Lennie can watch the baby grow at the end. And you'll be there when ... you know.'

'When you give birth.'

She's stoked.

I'm shit scared.

We're gonna get good bucks for the Mother City. We dance nearly every night now. But in the mornings, I work with Chantal. Peel potatoes. Cut onions. Me and her stand in her kitchen with sunglasses on, some of Honourious's shades. For the onion grief, though, not for show. I still sell at the Sunday market for Madeleine and Honorius. They give me fifty bucks for the day. Now when people ask me if the glasses block out UV, I say, 'Uh-uh. Pure fashion. And they're helluva good for cutting onions.'

Sonya, the lawyer, phones Chantal's house. 'I've already told Josie's mother the good news. It's not going to trial.' I flippin hyperventilate. 'The perpetrator ... um ...' She's lost Evil's name.

'Merrick.'

Chantal freezes with her spatula in the air. Lets big bits of batter drip on the floor.

'Yes, Merrick, has pleaded guilty. You did a good job of getting properly examined. The evidence of violence and the sperm sample swung it.' I grin like a maniac at Chantal. She smiles back but she doesn't know why. Sonya says, 'So now we must just wait for sentencing.' I love the way that chick says 'we'.

'When?'

'I'm afraid it will be sometime next year. I would say March if we're lucky.'

'Geez, that's slow.'

'I know. I'm sorry.'

I hug Chantal from the side, so our bellies don't bump. 'It's all because of you.' I don't care I've got doughnut batter in my hair. All I care is I don't have to go stand there and tell what he ripped and where he put it. Evil right there, gloating. God, I'm stoked.

And I get mad about belly. Phyllis has worked out a beautiful solo. Designed a whole flippin dance around me. It goes like this. I come on rolled in a tube of red fabric. I dance, unravel. Madeleine and Phyllis hold it so it flares behind me. They're gonna project the light so when I turn to the side, the shadow of my belly's like a hundred times bigger on the castle wall. All the others will stay on their knees, welcome the unborn child. Worship my big bloody belly.

We practise in class. Who needs a flippin projector? Those women build me up in class, those belly dancers, till I feel powerful. Bigger than anything ordinary.

They build me up so much you won't believe what I do. I phone Dumi, I swear. A few days before the concert I phone him at work. Give him a whole nervous speech. 'It's the first time I've ever danced in a show and I'm the only pregnant one. You don't have to come but if you're not busy maybe you wanna come for a bit. I've never been to the Gay Festival, but everyone says it's brilliant. Like, part of Cape Town.'

I dunno how he gets the time and date out of me.
Geez. What if he comes?

And guess what else? Annie comes home just in time.
She comes with five hundred bucks, finch feeding bucks. Lots of little bottles of coffee cream liqueur. A pile of baby bibs. She's sharp, this one. Before she hands over the bibs she asks, 'Are you keeping it?'

'No.'

'Okay, so who must these go to?' She holds the bibs up.

I take them. 'My friend, Chantal.'

Annie doesn't ask questions yet. She screws open a little liqueur bottle. 'Chantal can have the bibs,' she says. 'We'll have these.'

I dip my tongue into the lekker stuff. Sip it so, so slowly, so I don't overdo it. I sip up two tiny bottles, tell her the whole story. Annie's changed. She sits still, listens like she never used to. Watches me, sings when she's surprised. Still vlooks at the ugly stuff.

'Vokken vark.'

She's got all soft. Coos at the nice bits, I swear, like a little dove.

I try ask her, 'But what about Joburg? Tell me, man.'

'Next time.'

Her feet on my office chair, her bum on the balcony wall. Behind her on Blu Bottle, a gull hangs out with its mate. I'm telling you it's the one from New Year's Day. Maybe my dad sent it. My real dad who drowned in the sea. He sent it, Bang! into the glass, to say, 'Hey, wake up!' To hang on the gutter, keep an eye on me. Now the gull's hooked up and happy.

Same as Annie. She came alone today, but it's like she's one of a pair now, I swear. Cooing.

Oh my God, you should see them together. It's pathetic. We're sewing saris, me and Madeleine, and Annie brings Darryl up to meet us. He stands against Madeleine's counter, Annie stands against his legs. He rests his chin on her head. They're like one bloody beast with a happy double head. I can see how she got involved, though. He's got pock marked skin and he's not a snob. That makes him okay for a TV star. Genevieve's all over

him. Her dad gets embarrassed, tries to pull her away. But Darryl says, 'Don't worry,' so nicely you can tell Annie's told him everything. He knows to make a big thing of Genevieve's rings. He says, 'Beautiful, beautiful.' She knows the word, starts unpacking her pockets. She's got flippin piles of metal things. She lets Noel help her arrange them all on the bed. I get all nervous, try make coffee. But Darryl takes over, does it himself. Calls out to us in a flippin excellent voice, 'How many sugars?'

We finish the saris the day before the concert. Suresh's sister got married, I suppose, but all I can think of is me. The night before the concert I swear I don't sleep. I've got clean money in my pocket, a big, big bun in the oven and it feels like my heart can't hold it all. I'm scared of the strangers, I'm shit scared to dance. Still I catch myself hoping that Dumi will come. Weird, hey? After midnight it all smoothes out. 'Hey, you're gifted,' I say to myself. Then I sleep like a pregnant beauty.



We crash through gay queens with shaved chests and cardboard cones on their tits. Wigs, hair extensions, drunk on flippin free choice and alcohol. Phyllis takes us past the stage, says, 'Put yourselves in this space, it's much bigger than we're used to.' You're not flippin serious.

Thank God for Annie, cause Dumi comes way before he's meant to. He came, Ma. He came to see me.

Mom, he comes into the dressing room like he's blind. Like there are no dazzling chicks sticking hooks in eyes, fitting their nipples into belly dancing bras. Like there are no naked thighs doing flippin groin stretches. He comes in looking for me. He finds me straight over Annie's head, cause she's brushing glitter on my tummy.

He's got beautiful. Sorry to say so, but he is beautiful.

He hugs me so hard he gets the baby kickboxing all over the place. Annie gets freaked, the baby banging round in there, but Dumi thinks it's dead funny. The others don't mind him

in there. They can tell he can't see, he's only there for me. They stick desperate, curious fingers in my back, but I just keep mumbling, 'Old friend, he's an old friend.'

Phyllis treats him like a flippin king. Sends the tennis coach to get him a tequila. Then Annie takes him out to Darryl, but she tells me later, Dumi watched the backstage door like a hawk. He is beautiful, Ma.

We dance at the foot of the mountain. We come from Congo and Cape Town and flippin Hibberdene. We dance in the colours of deep down pieces of rock. In carnival pink and the pink strings of air round the earth as it spins. The pink of my white girl's gums. We dance in the blue of tripping electrics, and that bottomless blue where the sea's the deepest. We dance in banana leaf green, and the green of the sea just past the sand bank. We dance in the red of fresh blood and that ridiculous hibiscus. We dance in our different colour skins. We dance in a soft, spring wind. Whip, whip, whip, we whip our souls in the air, aim them straight at the moon.

I don't look at Dumi cause he's watching so hard. I look at my friends instead. Bonita and the girls huddle close to the stage. Josie grins at me like we're all alone. Bonita doesn't like crowds. She stands all small, till I wink at her, then she stretches up. But you should see Chantal and Lennie, all puffed up, so proud of my stomach. Looking around like they wanna say, 'She's having our baby.'

At the end of the dance, Phyllis moves to the front, takes over the stage. She's brilliant. She rocks the ghosts of the slaves. She makes the gay women crave their own bright silk. She whips joy into the guys with the fingerlicking pink on their nipples. The dance ends, they go mad, screaming and whistling like it's ladies night. Phyllis starts her speech before my solo. I'm so shit scared, my feet lose their feeling. Lucky the stage is dark now, just a spotlight on Phyllis. I'm wrapped in blood red cloth, hung by invisible gut above my head. Phyllis tells them the history of

the dance, the whole survival thing, the stuff about preparing for childbirth.

'Belly dance,' she says, 'is a prayer for grace.' She tells them how in ancient times, no men were allowed. Some gay guys go, 'Ooh hoo,' stoked about the women only thing.

God. My fingers are dead, my head numb like I've just popped five Syns. I'm a flippin rag doll, till I hear Phyllis say, 'New life, new birth. Revival!'

Thank God, something moves in me. Something graceful. I wind out slowly, tell myself, it's not me dancing, it's my soul. A huge shadow glides with me on the ancient stone wall.

I dance for my life. I dance for the child who nearly died. I dance for my granny who died in a scooter accident and my grandpa who got killed by a ton of wriggling fish. I dance slowly at first, my arms drift up, I spiral my fingers. Sleepy, snakey grace, waking. The others kneel around me, twist and swirl, stay low. My hip circles go faster, smaller, I roll my big belly. 'Aaah,' the crowd sighs. Some worried, I think, I might go into labour. But I show them what the dance is for. I pop, pop, pop my tummy, show them I'm ready, no matter what. I dance hard for you, Ma, and your mole, for Angie and her pancakes, for my real father who made music. Then I unpin my veil from my waist, whip it in front, whip it behind, fill it with air so it floats, light green. I crack my veil for my friends, I crack it again for the kid. I send her out, shoot her out on a tongue of green silk. Then I crack my veil, let it drift down, my soul, saying thank you.

Nora does a flippin fabulous back bend. Madeleine kneels at my feet, her face to the people. She touches my belly with her big, thick hands.

When the music ends, Phyllis shouts into the quiet, 'Resurrection!' The fast music slams on. All the women jump up, go straight into the drum dance. I chuck my veil at Josie's feet. The girls scramble to grab it. Josie drapes it over her head like a Muslim. Bonita gives her a nudge, warns her to watch it. Only then I look at Dumi. Straight on. I'm not scared he'll think I'm tryna pick him up, cause this is the No dance.

Never. Never. No! No! No!

Shik. Shik. Boom! Boom! Boom!

The crowd can't help it, they stamp and clap. The mountain behind is made out of light. Prehistoric rock light, rearing up. On the castle wall, a man who looks like Jesus jiggles his shoulders in a wheelchair. A giant kneels in front of him, sways the wheelchair this way and that. Their eyes are locked together, like welded by love. It's the okes from the flippin scrapyard.

'Wow, Tess. Powerful dance.'

Dumi's proud like we've got flippin blood ties.

'It means No.'

He looks blank.

'It's about women's power. Not sex, like in the music videos.'

'You're saying no?'

I let a smile slip. 'Yes.'

'Okay, okay. I won't even try.'

Disappointment chews faraway in my brain. Someone pulls on my shoulder, 'That was stunning.'

It's Musica, I swear. It's like a joke, Ma. I told you, a flippin miracle. Everyone came. Musica's in a double breasted jacket, with a new, camp accent. His little blonde boyfriend's in a grandpa vest, bangles up to his elbows. Musica's scared to look at my belly, but his little boyfriend's a bit drunk. Lies his fluffy head against it. Musica pulls him up.

I laugh. 'It's okay. It's okay.'

They go, but Musica looks back, still flippin grateful, I swear.

'And them?'

I twist the air to show Musica's curls. 'I know him from the road.'

Dumi's eyes jolt, then he squeezes my elbow a bit too hard.

'And that big red haired woman? Is she your teacher?'

'Ja.'

'The spiritual midwife.'

Geez, that blows me away. Right there I know Dumi gets it. He flippin gets it.

The others party right till sunrise. But Dumi takes me and Bonita's girls home at midnight. He's got a VW Cabriolet, white with a black soft top.

'Geez.'

He goes to a lot of trouble to say he got it second hand. A good deal, something about tax.

We can't really talk with the girls in the back, but I tell him I'm giving the baby to Chantal and Lennie. He doesn't ask why.

'How did you meet them?'

'He was a client.'

'Is he the father?'

'Uh-uh. He couldn't. He had a problem with, uh ... whiplash.'



The day after the Mother City, I go on my own to the clinic. I wait on the bench. Sister Brown marches past, her eyes flatten me. Her mouth's already straight and tight, it's like you can't surprise this chick. I've got the drumbeat from last night still in my head, and my whole body's a bit sore. I start shivering deep inside, not from the cold. Not from the Aids thing. From Sister Brown judging me. I take a big breath, I go, what must I think? Then I remember, hey, I'm going round with two Gods. There's God in me and God in the kid. Stand back Sister Brown.

Sister Brown's like a flippin tar road. Level, rock hard, stay on your side of the white line. Today she turns into a runway. I tell her the whole story, breathless and friendly, cause of the double dose of God.

'Pregnant,' and 'rape,' gets me nowhere. But when I say, 'I've given up sex work,' she lets my wheels right over the line. She forgives me, I swear, for everything I've done and everything I'm still gonna do. When I say I'm giving the baby away, her straight lips turn up and her eyes go all light. She smiles, gives me space to lift off, I swear. I remember, sheez, Sister Brown's got God in her too. That's three in one small room.

They trained her to ask a whole lot of questions. She asks, 'If you are HIV positive, who you will tell?'

'Chantal, that's the mother. Madeleine. I dunno. I suppose all my friends.'

'If you are HIV positive, who will look after you?'

'You.'

She gets a horrible shock. Then she laughs like hell, cause she knows I'm joking about how she's always hated me. Then I think, maybe she also wanted to like me. You know, deep down. She stabs my finger, eina, takes my blood. Says we've gotto wait ten minutes. 'Do you want to wait outside, or just sit here?'

I stay with Sister Brown.

It's the same again. Pink for danger. Another life and death colour test.

'Do you have kids?' I ask Sister Brown.

'I've got one. I had two. I had a handicapped child, but he died.'

I find myself nodding like a flippin nun. 'He's in a good place, then.'

Just for a second her eyes go dead happy. She smiles out the window like he's just flying past.

Sheez. God. Like I knew, the white space stays white. A beautiful white space for the baby and me.

Sister Brown shakes my hand hard.

'Thank you,' I say, to her and to God at the same time.

I haven't got Chantal's number so I phone Goliath Shocks. But they won't put me through to the workers. So I leave an urgent message for Lennie Meyer. 'Your baby's hundred percent.'

Josie says Dumi phoned while I was out. Says he's gonna come see me after work. Sundown he's there, I swear, with babygrows from Woolworths. Loose, in the bag. Two white ones. Josie and Sharonne kiss them, hold them up. Say, 'Aah cuute,' like old mothers.

'That is so, so sweet.' But I mean Dumi. Bonita knows, the way she looks away, all embarrassed.

He wants to take me for supper. I panic, say I've already eaten. Bonita takes charge. 'She's had some spaghetti, that's all. She needs fish.'

'I'm full though. I haven't got space ...'

Dumi stares at my huge belly, chances it, 'Come, you can make space.'

The others make me go.

I'm scared to be alone with him. I can feel my face is blotchy. My belly's so big my legs feel like flippin sticks underneath. He holds my elbow like a lady across the road. He asks me something. I get the words '... seared tuna' between the car swipes. I nod like crazy cause that sounds nice.

We go to his flat in Cape Town. It's a flippin far drive, past Rhodes Mem. The mountain's gone soft in the half dark. It's like the buck see us coming. They start running, glide high speed along the highway fence. I tell him about Annie, how she loves to chase them.

'Why?'

'I think it makes her feel, you know, in charge.'

'What makes you feel in charge?'

Here come the questions.

'I'm finding new ways.'

He nods, like he gets what's happened.

I push him, 'And you? You feed the world?'

He laughs, 'Yup.'

'Like your Ma.'

He's dead quiet for a while. The yacht masts are like trees tilting in the harbour. I think I've pissed him off. But he takes my hand. Squeezes, lets go. A bit of sun still leaks through a dip in the mountain, makes a pretty pink streak on the sea.

His flat's right in that dip. Eesh, the place feels like a hotel room. Helluva beige, you know. Off-white curtains, off-white couch. Wood and metal. But he's got this beautiful parrot, a flippin unbelievable lime green. I'm talking cream soda crossed with a tennis ball. But the bird's head looks cut off from its body. A whole ring of feathers missing round its neck. Inside the ruffles,

this thin sucker stick. I laugh myself silly, till the parrot laughs back. I'm not joking, it's Dumi's laugh. Then it barks like a flippin old lady's dog. An identical bark comes from the next door flat.

'Ssh,' says Dumi.

The parrot goes, 'Ssh.'

I laugh again, the parrot laughs back with Dumi's laugh. I'm having the time of my life, but Dumi looks sorry. 'He's lonely.'

'Why?'

He shrugs, looks lost. 'I travel too much.'

'Get him a mate.'

His grins slow and wide, 'I'm trying.'

This shuts me up fast. He lets the bird out the cage. It flies over me, I hardly worry. Lands on his shoulder. It nips at his ear, ever so gentle. Tucks its head against his neck, makes the noise of a flippin pigeon.

'What if he shits?'

'You wouldn't do that, would you Jabu? Oh, no.' Dumi's talking in this silly baby voice. 'You're too much of a gentleman.'

That night I tickle the greenest head you can get, gobble my wine. I watch Dumi spice big, pink tuna steaks, the bird on his shoulder. I swallow buckets of spit. 'My mouth's watering like you won't believe.'

'Didn't you get enough in Natal?'

'It's the baby. It's crazy about fish.'

'Are you sure you don't want to keep it?'

I keep nodding, show him I'm sure.

'Because I can help you ...'

'Dumi ...'

'Yes.'

'The baby saved me. You should've seen me.'

But his eyes aren't even scared.

'It was a flippin miracle.'

He pours sweet chili sauce. Spreads it with a knife. Turns the steaks over, shows their clean sides. 'So you don't want to be its mother?'

'Chantal's its mother.'

'Will you tell me about all of it sometime?'

I feel heavy inside, like I'm saying, 'Yes' in a church. Keep my eyes on the raw fish.



I move in with Chantal and Lennie, just like I said.

The first night I'm there I dream I'm in your deep freeze, Ma, with your fish.

Eye to eye with a huge salmon. The ice crackling and popping. I'm lying on my side, my elbow up like a dorsal fin, my feet pressed together like a fish's tail. It's cold, but I'm thinking, never mind, you'll defrost me on the grass and keep the cats away. But it's Chantal who opens the door and carries me out, not you.

When I tell Chantal in the morning, she puts an extra blanket on my bed. She asks me, 'Do you have a lot of bad dreams?'

'Ag, hardly ever now. And my bad dreams, they're a bit funny. Even in the dream I think I should laugh.'

Mornings, I help Chantal chop up stuff. In the afternoon we sit on the stoep. Huge pots of food growl on the stove while me and Chantal talk. She tells me the whole story about banning me. She's like me. When she tells a story she goes, 'he said-I said-he said.' So this is how it went.

Chantal went to Lennie and said, 'Kathleen said Arnold said he saw you driving with the white girl from the road.'

He was tjoepe stil.

'Did you go with a prostitute?'

He said nothing.

'I didn't want to marry a man like that.'

'Like what?'

'Like those men who've got to prove themselves. I married you because you were different.'

'I'm still a man.'

'I know, but you were kind and soft.'

'Ja, but you slat me for being soft.'

'I slat you for running away. Your firewood means more to you than I do.'

'It's my art.'

'But you run away with it. You run away every day and all I've got is food. And look how fat I've got.'

'Now that's my fault?'

'Ja. I eat like this when I'm lonely.'

'You've got lots of friends. And you watch too much TV. That's why you're fat.'

'You shouldn't say your own wife is fat.'

'And you're always with children. Your brother's children, the next door children ...'

'What's wrong with that?'

'It makes me feel stupid. That's why I make the horses ...'

'That's another thing. Why the horses, horses, horses ...?'

'What else must I make?' They stare hard at each other. 'Must I make a carving of you?'

'Yes. Why not?'

I don't tell Chantal it was my idea.

She tells me how it went. When he started carving her, they talked about me. I can see them quiet, the evening sun turning the dust on the carpet into sparklers. He was sitting behind her. She said, 'You put all your love into your stupid horses. And that white girl.'

But she probably said, 'whore.'

'I don't love her like that. Man, I've only seen her twice.'

He carved, maybe, the softest part of her neck. Said quietly, 'I only love you.'

Her hands on her knees, her heart leaping like paraffin on a nearly dead fire. 'Then why do you lie? Why do you say you didn't have sex?'

'I tried.'

The flames suffocated.

'When?'

'Once at the stables.'

When Chantal tells me this, she watches my eyes in case he lied. But I nod.

She says, 'Tess, I stayed awake the whole night. Sick with jealousy. I got up to pee. Put on the TV. Went to the kitchen, ate cake. Then I shook him. I woke him up. Just that once? Do you promise? He said, Yes. But ey, the pain in me kept me awake all night.'

'Ag, shame,' I say. 'Sorry, man.'

Then the next time she sat for him she asked, 'What else did you do with her?'

'I went to watch Damon wrestling.'

'What? When?'

'One Saturday night.'

I can feel the bitter quiet. Lennie bending his head, maybe getting the outline of her breasts from the side.

'What did your brother think of your stukkie?'

But she probably said 'whore.'

'They didn't see me.'

'Why not?'

'They never see me. I stay in the crowd. I hide.'

'What for?'

'I don't want them to come judge me. Treat me like a moffie. Ask me when are the babies coming. Ask me, what do I do to stay fit. What better job am I gonna get. I'm a moffie compared to them. You know how they break my neck, just greeting me.'

'But Damon would be happy if he knew you watched him.'

'Ag. He's got my dad.'

Something in his face blew off the dead ash. Blew tiny flames back to life. She grabbed his hand, put it to her cheek. Kissed the middle of it.

That's when he said, 'Sorry, Chantal.'

She tells me at the end, 'You know how they say, sorry doesn't help?'

I nod.

'Sorry helps.'

It's hard for a flippin whale on land. Sheez. The days go bloody slow. Lucky Chantal and me like to hang out. Chantal talks a lot, but she's sharp as a blade. Strong, if you need her. And flip,

can she cook? Curry like I've never tasted before. Whole cloves, whole cinnamon sticks. Woody spice flowers called star anise. Piles of yellow rice. Vetkoek dripping syrup. I stuff a whole one in my mouth, greedy for the next. But by the time I'm finished chewing, I'm full. Sticky chicken, oh my God. Fried in a pot with fruit chutney. I'm talking huge pots, scrubbed silver. We eat from the food she makes for the staff at Schultz Pharmaceuticals. In the old days maybe I would've eaten their pills, now I'm eating their bloody beautiful bobotie. Chantal makes trays and trays of it, covers them with silver foil. We pack them in Lennie's boot. Cover them with towels. He drops them off early at the canteen on his way to Goliath Shocks.

Chantal's got beautiful kitchen knives. Long blades, stubby blades, skinny blades, all blades. Lennie carved a holder for them. She's had them since she was married, she said. She got them from Lennie for their first anniversary. He sharpens them himself. Takes them outside, sounds like a sword fight. Sharpens them, one on the other.

'When you weren't talking, did he still sharpen your knives?' She knows exactly what I'm asking. She says, 'That's how I knew there was still a chance.'

Chantal cries during Days of our Lives. She watches the re-runs in the morning, cries when those perfect Americans get hurt. I tease her, call her Waterworks.

One day she tunes me, 'You must stop using those eye drops. They dry up your tear glands. Then you can't cry if you need to.'

'But that's good.'

'Uh-uh, it's not healthy. We cry for a reason.'

'What reason?'

'We cry out the poison.'

I think she's gonna go on about suffering and stuff, but she just smiles at me. 'If a piece of dust goes in your eye, your tears wash it out.'

We both laugh cause of all the stuff she deliberately left out.

Dumi comes to visit me at Chantal's. We sit and tell Chantal and Lennie a whole lot of stories about when we were kids.

'How old were we when we tried to stick snails in the pavement?'

'Oh ja. You cruel child,' Dumi says.

'How old were we?'

'I was about ten.'

'Cause we saw Mrs. Gentili ...'

'Next door ... What do you call that with the cement ...?'

'Mosaicing.'

'Ja, mosaicing her table. She was an out and out alcoholic,' Dumi says.

Me and Dumi laugh cause we still see her stumbling round, happy as shit, all alone at her own garden party. Dumi reminds me, 'But she did hers with sea shells.'

'She made it so bumpy her whisky glass couldn't balance.' We laugh like we did when we spied through her fence. I say, 'Anyway, we decided ...'

'*You* decided ...'

'... to use snails instead. Roadworks left wet cement outside our house. We were gonna stick the snails in and put up a sign that said, Go Slow Like a Snail.'

'I wrote the sign,' says Dumi.

'But he didn't wanna do it. What if it burns? What if it burns the snails' feet? He stuck some cement on his tongue. He shouted, Stop! Stop! It burns! Take them out, take them out! I said, Don't be stupid, man. Have you ever heard a snail screaming?' I shut up suddenly. Cause I remember what Dumi said, then.

He said, 'Tess, sometimes things scream, but no one can hear.'

Dumi rubs my back, there between my shoulder blades. I say quietly, 'It's just that, snails were about the only thing I wasn't scared of.'

Dumi tells Chantal and Lennie, 'So we threw them, instead, into Mrs Gentili's flower bed.'

Chantal and Lennie laugh at our stories. Sometimes they stop listening, we go on for so long. Some of the stuff, you know, you had to be there. Or you had to be ten.



Dumi goes for a week to Cairo. Shit, I get all edgy. But he phones three times to say, 'Hey sisi, how's life?' On the last day he says he's got very good news. He can't say yet cause he's gotto first run it past his staff.

When Dumi gets back he tells me it's all organised. Get this. His work's organising this big conference, the one he explained on the radio. Dumi went and told everyone at work about the history of belly, how it meant survival. And they've got this big drive towards feeding pregnant and breastfeeding mothers in central Africa. He gives me a whole lot of numbers about infant mortality, all over the world compared to Africa. Babies that die before they turn one, mostly cause of no food and bad water. The mom goes hungry when she's pregnant and the kid goes hungry once it's born. It's very bad in the south of Africa. In Angola two hundred out of one thousand babies die before they're one. Same as Afghanistan. But places like Sweden, only two babies in one thousand die. In New Zealand, it's like, five. South Africa's in the middle. About sixty, I think. Thank God Chantal's been feeding me. Geez.

I'm so freaked out by the numbers, I forget he's tryna break some news. Get this. They're gonna fly fifteen dancers to Cairo to open the Belly of Africa conference. I nearly wet my pants. He tells me relax, it's only end of Jan. I'll have three months to get ready after the baby. Then we'll get on a plane, go dance for thousands of politicians and feeders like Dumi. Flippin big wigs from all over the world.

Dumi and me go and see Phyllis. She is so, so stoked. She rattles her hands in the air like an African mama. When she's calm, she keeps tryna sell him what he's already bought. 'We have a nice cultural mix. Women of all colours and persuasions in our group.'
'I know.'

‘And they are all dedicated dancers, you saw that at the Mother City concert ...’

‘I know. I know.’

In the car, this kid on a skateboard’s hogging the road. He flicks up his board, catches it. Dumi’s gotta jam on brakes. The boy stands still, cocks his head. We wind down the windows to listen, too. It’s Phyllis, whooping in her courtyard.

We’re gonna dance at the conference that Dumi organised. Ten of us plus five girls from a belly studio in Athlone. Can you believe it? We’re gonna go to where the Muizenberg geese come from.

Phyllis makes me take it dead easy. Tells me to come only twice a week and dance gently, gently. ‘I promise you that you will be strong for the birth,’ she says. ‘And you will be fit for Egypt.’

I take slow walks across a prickly field. Go there where the big, brown vleis start pulling to the sea. When they see me coming, the Egyptian geese make a scene. Bark like dogs, flap around, hustle their babies into a team. Float off. The way the babies grow, they’ll be teenagers by the time this baby comes. I tell the baby not to hurry. Phyllis says there’s lots of time. Grow nicely in there, I tell her, and come out big and strong.

I start writing all this for you on the bank. I sit for so long, the geese get used to me. They climb back on the bank, shit all over the place. Tuck their beaks into the fluffy fur close to their skin. They’re perfect. Leather brown up the back, black gloss round their eyes. But they’re tough as hell. Upset them, they honk, they hoot, they take running dives. Flippin cheeky, like the girls on the road. Pretty, but when they open their mouths you can hear you better not mess with them.

Funny, one day I’m just thinking of Annie. I’m on the bank writing, I start giggling there with the geese, cause of that time long ago, this one owed bucks to Annie. She gave him credit, but he didn’t come pay. A flippin teacher, I swear. Annie checked him at Shoprite buying expensive grapes.

‘Hey! Where’s my money?’

The whole shop stopped.
The ou acted dumb. 'What money?'
'Money for my fanny, man!'

Same day, Annie walks up the road just as me and Chantal are pulling out in the Mini. She opens the door, gets in the back.
'Where are we going?' she says.
So we all go for the check up at Fish Hoek hospital.

Sheez, False Bay's breeding. There's such a long queue it takes a whole morning just to suck blood and make me a file. But Chantal's got snacks and she gets her hands on a Star Dust mag from another waiting mother. Annie gets all pissed off at first, the way I laugh at the celebs.

'Annie, I'm not laughing at Keira. I'm laughing at the dork who took the photo. I mean, what kind of freak would take a photo of her armpit?'

So Annie also laughs at Keira's crinkly armpit. The editor's drawn a red koki circle round some loose skin. I read the words to Annie, 'And she thinks she's not skinny?'

It's lucky, cause lunchtime Chantal gets Lennie on his cell. His mate from the factory gives him a lift to Fish Hoek. Lennie rushes in just when the doctor's got cold gel on my tummy, the scanner switched on. This doctor's a fit, coloured oke. Two little stripes shaved near his ears. Looks like a raver, you know, like he dances all weekend in the forest. Monday comes, he finds himself standing with a scanner.

A creature comes onto the screen.

Oh my God. A real baby.

Snot en tran. Annie thinks we're all mad. All of us crying, Chantal and Lennie and me. Raver's also surprised. Watching Lennie, he starts blinking way more than normal. You see, the kid's got a perfect round head, like Lennie. Lennie's loose arms and legs. Wide apart eyes, like Chantal. I swear you can see what it looks like in there.

'But it's upside down,' says the doctor. 'Breech.'

'So now?' Chantal's all scared.

'We've got a week to turn it, otherwise we'll have to caesar.'

'Cut?'

'Yes. You're RH negative which means we can't risk any tearing. Your blood mustn't mix with the baby's. It's very dangerous.'

Chantal's a wreck. 'What can happen?'

'One or both of them can die.'

Chantal lets out a funny cry.

But it's weird, I'm not worried. One thing I know. No one's gonna die.

Only, shit. Flip. If they cut, there goes Egypt.

Lennie strokes Chantal's back, like it's her who's gotta be cut.

'Do you want to know the sex?' Raver asks.

Chantal looks at me, so I look at Lennie. 'Do you?'

Lennie looks at Chantal. Chantal nods.

He shows us. 'Here's the umbilical cord. Here's the pelvic casement. Now if we go in closer ...'

A floating little willie.

I laugh and laugh like a mad chick. I get them all laughing like a willie's the funniest thing in the world. Which it is.

'Why are you laughing?' Annie asks.

'I was so sure it was a girl. I was so, so sure.'

On the way down the corridor, I tell Annie only, 'I got it wrong. My girl's still coming.'

A boy for Chantal and Lennie. They're gonna call him Luke. Luke sounds like lake. Maybe he'll have blue eyes.

Dumi comes for supper. It's like he's proud it's a boy, I swear. Hugs Lennie like he's done something brilliant.

'Give me something to slaughter, man.'

Chantal gives him her biggest carving knife, tells him to carve up the chicken.

Dumi's so sweet, he buys a cot. Comes in one day behind a huge, heavy box. Puts it down at Chantal's feet.

'I've come to swap. The baby and the cot for the girl.'

He grips me round the thighs. Lifts me straight up, careful of my belly. Makes like he's walking out. We all laugh like mad and I go so red you'd think he hung me upside down.

I'll try shut up about Dumi. But I just wanna tell you, Ma, he's got beautiful. He's got a fine moustache and thick, curly lashes. His teeth are flippin ivory, I swear. So bloody perfect they look false. He's got silky eyebrows for a Zulu. He's still got those dead naughty dimples that come out of nowhere. Even when he's shy and he's trying not to smile. He's damn noisy, though. He talks a helluva lot. But he knows how to listen. He waits till I know what I'm tryna say. He waits quietly till he gets it, then his eyebrows go up and his eyes go all glad cause he understands. Okay, he must have some faults. I think, maybe, he's a bit of a coward. He doesn't take you straight on. He doesn't wanna fight, so he works with you, goes with you. Like his imaginary falcons. No punishment. Only rewards.

And his body? I don't wanna think about it. It's nice, that's all I can say. It's hard in there, Ma. His chest. His legs are long. He's got that man's apple shaped bum. I don't wanna think about it though. I can't think about bodies yet.

Me and Chantal go try turn the baby. The nurse has got curly black hair with grey threads. She's light brown with sticky mascara. Hands like a man, lots of light marks from missing rings. I swear I know her. I dunno where from.

It's the same doctor who did the scan, the fit little raver. He lies me flat, puts his hands on my belly. Pushes like he's tryna turn the hands of a clock. Tryna force the baby to do a flip. But the baby pushes back, bloody stubborn. Tells him, Stuff off.

He feels inside me with his gloves. I clench my fists, tense up. Chantal strokes my wrist, on the inside, where it's sensitive. The kid refuses flat. The doctor gets all flustered, a bad loser. Says natural birth's too dangerous for us. He goes out, peeling off his gloves. Says, all sulky, 'I'll book you for a caesar right now.' 'Oh no-o.' I'm gonna miss Egypt.

I know it's selfish, Ma. I know it seems a bit sick. It's just what happens to your head when you're tryna survive. You know, once you've gone and given your baby away.

I think, shit. Five days in Cairo. My first time on a plane. All down the drain. I hide in Chantal's dark eyes, pray, Please no. The nurse says softly, 'Quickly, get onto your hands and knees.'

Something in her voice makes me hurry up. I go up like a dog, my belly hanging. She rubs her hands together to warm them up. I watch the light marks on her fingers, feel her soft False Bay breath on my back. 'Relax.' She starts humming a slow song I know from somewhere. Rubs my sides, then my tummy. Round and round in big circles. 'I don't know why these men always insist on lying you on your back.'

Chantal's shocked, same as me. We stare at the nurse. Does this chick know me?

'Because there's so much more space when you're up like this.' I giggle. Man, she's not talking about my past.

She gets her palms on the baby, massages hard. The baby digs in. So she eases up, sings the song she was humming. It's that Porcelain song that asks, Have I got the moon in my womb? I can't help smiling, on my knees like a dog. She smiles back, says, 'Do you like the Red Hot Chili Peppers?' I nod. She sings some more, strokes. Breathes, 'Relax,' on my back one more time. Then she grips the baby hard and swings it, no bloody nonsense.

The baby bulges, kicks. Coils tight through no space. There's a huge, slippery twist inside my belly.

Then it twitches, taps a few times. Relaxes.

Someone's coming. Chili Peppers flips me quickly onto my back. Grins as Raver comes through the door. We're all happy as anything, no need to fake it. She lies nicely to the doctor, 'You did it. You persuaded the baby. It decided to turn.'



All I remember after that is every time I laugh, I wanna wee. Chantal and Lennie jump up, help me out of my lounge chair. People bring presents. Nappies, baby clothes, flippin teething rings. Chantal opens them carefully, pulls the sticky tape off the wrapping paper. Lines two shelves in the room I'm sleeping in. She tries to pack the baby stuff away but Josie and Sharonne take it all out. Go, 'Aahh cute,' over and over.

On the twentieth of October I wake up at three in the morning with period pain. I'm shit, shit scared, cause it's my first time, so I go into Chantal and Lennie's room. They're fitted together, fast asleep. The cot's already up in their room. Sheez, am I sorry I woke them.

Chantal's got a bag packed next to the bed. Her shoes all ready at the door, no lies. In the Mini she gives me a piece of fudge that she made. Asks me if I'm thirsty. Lennie's jaw's so tight you could play the violin on it. We speed along the sea. It's so dark the white foam looks like soft cloth.

We get to the hospital way before it even gets sore. But they let me stay the next day cause the baby's blood is different to mine. Chantal tells the night nurse, 'We can't risk any tearing.' Chantal and Lennie show everyone the contract that says they're gonna be the parents. Lennie's brother's lawyer wrote up a whole adoption agreement that we all signed, like a hundred times. I've got three months to change my mind, but I know I won't. I can visit the kid anytime, so I'll be like an auntie, but I've got no legal rights. It's a trust thing. The adoption makes the hospital staff all mushy. They let Chantal and Lennie stay with me the whole time.

Next night at seven, they break my water. I don't wanna see what they put inside, but it feels like a long, long needle with a hook. Then it gets horrible.

Lennie holds me under my armpits, stays at my head. He's terrified of what's happening between my legs. Chantal would

pull the baby out herself if she could, but she stays with me, asks me, 'What can I do for you? What can I do?'

And guess who comes on duty? The Chili Peppers nurse who turned the kid. Sheez, I'm so freaked out, she feels like my long lost mother. When she says, 'Wait, don't push. I don't want you to tear,' I trust her timing. I let go the muscles there at my fanny, there in my womb. Just when they wanna burst, blow through my body. Shoot the baby out like a cannon. That's when I fight with my mind. Isolate. Let go all those clever muscles, number one, number two, number three. I say to Chantal, 'Rub my legs, rub my legs,' and she rubs my legs, kneads them. I think of her hands, the way they make dough. The pain screams a shattering song. Flames burn me everywhere.

'Rub my back, rub my back!' and Chantal rubs my back with deep, warm strokes. I put my mind there, on my back, on the strong, warm muscles that wanna fly.

Sheez. Kill me. It'll be easier. To die would be terribly nice.

Then, during one of those breaks when some flippin God whips the pain away, Chili Peppers, I hate her, says 'Okay, now's your time.'

I must flippin push full throttle, during the lull. I must make ripping pain when I've got none. It goes on like this.

Lennie sweats a river, his sweat dripping into my eyes.

Chantal rubs my legs, rubs my back like she's gonna rub me into fine flippin powder. Her face as white as her own raw pastry.

Me, I know when it's time for the trick. I know when it's time to separate. The pain waves have crashed, the baby's relaxed, right at the mouth. Chili Peppers says 'Now!' and I dance for my life. Dance that kid out of the womb. Just like in class, I tuck in my pelvis, whip all three lots of muscle together. Shove them hard against my spine. Squeeze for my life, snap the baby away. Oh my God! The pain!

I cry, 'Mommy, Mommy,' in my brain.

The baby's surprised, shoots for the light.

Chili Pepper's ready, arms out. She catches him. Chantal whimpers, a mother dog. Lennie staggers, made of rags. I sit up a bit. It runs red between my legs, like the abortion I saw. But this little boy's gonna live. He's covered in this buttery stuff, but underneath I can see caramel skin, the same as Lennie. Thank God for Hanif, is all I can think. Thank you, Hanif.

Chili Peppers hangs him upside down. The little bugger screams blue murder.

I guessed right about his eyes. A blue eyed Luke. Brown skin, blue eyes. Come to remind us we're all made of God.

He was already doing it in my belly.

They hold him up for me to see.

Even then, when he was just born, when he couldn't even see, I looked in his eyes and saw God.

Chantal and Lennie kiss me all over my face. Then they lean over me, block the light. The doctor comes in to cut the cord. I can hear blood, everything sounds wet. Sounds like someone's sawing through rubber tube. Now and then I see red rubber gloves. I feel the blood pour out of me. A whole nine months of it. Chantal and Lennie are shining, I swear. They're like Joseph and Mary. And I'm the angel who took twenty seven years to bring him to them.

The nurse spikes my arm.

'We give this shot to rhesus mothers so next time you fall pregnant, the rhesus factor won't cause any trouble.'

She asks me how I'm feeling, sticks another needle in a vein, says there's light morphine in the drip. Asks me again, 'How're you feeling?'

Sheez, a drip drip and I'm scary happy, eezy breezy, better than codeine. My voice is high, like a child's. 'Fine, so fine.'

'Not sad?'

I forget to answer her. She tucks the white sheets under my chin.

'My next baby will be a girl.'

'Oh?'

'I'll look after her nicely.'

It makes perfect sense to me, what I say. She has to understand.

'Maybe I'll call her Madeleine. That means mother. Or maybe Chantal. Maybe Phyllis ... but Phyllis is ... I dunno.'

Her man's hands smooth the sheet on my shins.

'When I have my little girl I'll be a mother.'

I hook it all together, high as a kite. 'Which means Tess.'

Madeleine and Dumi sneak in from the waiting room. Chili Peppers tells them I was a perfect lady. I hardly screamed, I didn't swear once.

'Tess is like this,' says Madeleine.

I listen to them talking. They look so beautiful.

'I've done it once,' Chili Peppers says. 'And I punched the doctor, I was in so much pain.'

Dumi laughs through warm, smooth wood.

Chili Peppers boasts, 'I had a beautiful boy.' She holds a hand higher than herself. 'He's big now.'

That's when I get it. Another flippin miracle. Chili Peppers is Musica's mom. She's the nurse in the photo on the fridge. With her hands out, ready to catch.



They give me pills to dry my milk up.

In the morning I sit with Chantal at the nursery, watch her hold Luke to her big, bare boobs. She feeds him with a bottle of baby milk.

'Skin against skin', Chili Peppers says. 'The baby needs to feel skin.' Lennie brings Chantal juice from the machine, like she's really making her own milk. He buys me chips and Rolos, those chocolates with the toffee inside. Those babies in the nursery, those little birds without feathers, make me feel a bit sick. The morphine's worn off and those baby birds scare me. I'm not ready to be a mother. I'm not.

We stick to our plan. I go home that day. Dumi picks me up, takes me to fetch my stuff from Chantal's. Takes me back to

my flat. I cry when I see False Bay Holiday. It must be the hormones. It's peeling worse than ever. It smells like boiling bones. But there's a shiny black kid in the tightest pigtails chucking a tennis ball at the wall. Josie's on my balcony washing something in a bucket. She squeezes it out and looks up at the sky. The cleanest white birds park on the gutter, facing the first, soft wind from the south.

Dumi gets it all wrong. He thinks I hate it. 'How many cows to get you out of here?'

God, I freeze up. I act deaf, but the breeze plays my feathers, I swear. This thrill of possibility runs under my skin. I see his hand coming for mine, but I quickly get busy, wipe my face dry. Stuff it up.

The bugger remembers the cow project.

I swear you've never seen such a party for coming home with nothing. It's just me, bleeding and tender. Phyllis, Nora, Madeleine's whole flippin family. Bonita and the girls. Annie and Darryl. All asking, 'How're you feeling?'

I'm flippin hung over from the morphine, but they bring me Coke and fish cakes, I swear. They know what I like. Dumi goes to Blu Bottle and buys some champagne. Marie and Henrique come drink with us. Josie's so clever she's drawn me a picture of a pyramid. I dunno how, but she knows I need to look forwards straight away. Little men in g-strings carrying concrete blocks, lines of them marching up to the pyramid. It says, Good luck for Kyerow.

When people ask me, 'How're you doing?' I act casual. I don't say there's a big baby missing. I say life's a breeze after childbirth. Everything's flippin fun compared to it. They stare at my nice, flat tummy. Check my empty arms for an invisible kid. But Sharonne and Josie stay nice and close. I dunno what gets into Josie. She gets on my knee like she's small. And Noel doesn't leave me alone. He's picking up his big sister's sickness, cause he brings me bright things. He brings me a flat fishing swivel. A flat one rand coin. A flat safety pin.

I skell him out, 'No, man Noel. It's dangerous.'

The little bugger's sticking things on the railway line, letting the train crush them flat, make them pretty.

It's hard for me to talk about Luke. It's weird, Mom, I don't want him. But I miss him in my stomach. I wanna cry sometimes from the deep space that aches there. It's like they took out my insides, but I'm still alive. I'm walking around strong but I'm thinking, Put it back. Put it back.

Bonita knows, I dunno how. She keeps asking me about it. I tell her, 'It's fine, it's fine.' But one day I tell her straight, in front of the girls. 'It's like a big, dry space. All I can do is pray it fills up.' Josie's funny, she kind of gets it. She says, 'It's like when the doctor pulled out my back tooth and I got a dry pocket.'

'Dry socket,' Bonita mutters.

'I had to wash it out with salt water.'

That's what I do. I go swim in the sea. The girls just watch me, cause the sea's still cold. But I go straight in, let it float me, chuck me around. Let the cold shrink that space in my belly. Stroke me, hold me cold. Ag, you know what I mean, Ma. You love the sea, too. It's got more life than even the world. Just like the soul Phyllis talks about.

It's noisy at the beach. The demolition bulldozers roar. The echo of hammers jolts the sky. They're gutting the old buildings, Bonita's old block, the old Empire. Pulling out their insides, tryna save their grand old faces.

After two weeks, Dumi takes me to see Luke at home. I think Dumi believes me that I'm fine, cause he's all relaxed, like he's sure I'm over it. But I'm all watery in my legs again, teardrops fall in the pit of my stomach, there where Luke grew.

I can't even smile when we go in. Lennie misses my cheek and kisses my nose by mistake. He stands calm with his hands on his hips, but his eyes strain like he's tryna read tiny print. Dumi's not stupid. He fusses over the baby, gives me lots of time to go close. But I hang back too long, so Chantal elbows her way in. She's one of those chicks who knows what's right, you know? She puts Luke on my lap. She stands big, over me.

Breathing all jerky. She opens the blanket, so he wakes up all cross. I start crying when I see those blue eyes. I can't help it. Cause now he's a fat little person who can see. Now he's got smooth little cheeks and little black lashes. God, he smells precious, like perfume and powder and cream. He goes still, like he knows I'm crying. Pinches his fingers tight in his fists. He stares straight past my face, full of clear, blue love. I look behind me but there's no one. Dumi laughs, 'It's his ancestors.'

But I know it's me. I know he remembers me. I don't say it, though, all I say is, 'He's beautiful.'

'He's the best boy in the world,' Lennie says.

Then Luke rolls his eyes like he's flippin concussed. I wrap him up again, all clumsy. He yawns with his curvy little mouth. His tiny lids a hundred times too heavy. Lennie can't take it, he hurries into the kitchen, 'Where's the shortbread, you said?'

Chantal squeaks, 'In the plastic, under the butter.'

'I can't find it.'

She sounds desperate, 'It's a green plastic.'

I look up, catch her terror. 'It's okay,' I tell her. 'It's okay.'

Those guys, they're a family. Mommy, Daddy, Baby. Shortbread. You know, like in a beautiful painting. It's perfect, it's finished. Whose gonna go rub out a whole bit? Only a flippin evil person.

I won't change my mind.

But I won't feel it deep. Not yet.

I know I'm hiding away. I know I'm covering up. I don't wanna feel properly what I lost. I can't yet, Ma. The hole will swallow me up.



Dumi turns out to be a Jesus freak. But he keeps it to himself till he gets to church. Geez, he invites me one Sunday. Mom, he's different this oke. He really doesn't care what people

think. He sings louder than everyone. I flippin fall in love with his voice. Just his voice, okay.

His hands in the air, singing a cool gospel song. It's the People's Church in Claremont. Full of ironed people, spoilt kids with tongue rings. A couple of black people with nice, smooth skin. Me, they'll never guess about me. I bathed for an hour and ironed my skirt three times. I try sit so it doesn't crumple, but the music loosens me up, you know. I drum with my toes, try tell my hips to keep still. My fingers itch to go in the air, like Dumi's. Cause I believe in Jesus, and all those other ous who came to earth to remind us what we are. To tell us again, 'Hey, you're not a body.' I just wish there were more chicks, you know? More women. There must have been some. They must have trashed all the proof of the holy women. I reckon Jesus's mother, Mary was one. She knew what the hell she was doing here. She knew she had a special job. She went, Here everyone, here's a kid who can help you remember.

Guess who recognises me in the church? Someone I'll never forget. The woman with the knuckles and the deep, worried line. The one who sped me and Josie to the police. She's killing herself staring, tryna see if it's me. I just smile. Don't say, 'Hi, there.' Don't even say, 'Thanks for the lift.'

'What happened?' she says.

My smile turns to cardboard, melting glue underneath. Does she flippin expect me to talk about rape? But she says, 'I mean, I mean, what happened to you? You look glorious.'

I'm not used to good words like that. I die inside, try shrug her away. Dumi says next to me, serious as anything, 'She's been born again.'

Geez, he sounds as bad as Draincleaner. But I don't mind today. Cause it's true. I feel like it's true, but not in the way that the Christians say. Cause I was always holy, even when I thought I was dirt on the road.

They have killer chocolate cake at the church. Dark and wet. The preacher comes over to us. Thank God I've never had sex with him. He's wearing a black shirt, collar up like a rock

star. He's tubby, short hair with a tiny bald spot like someone dropped something hot on his head. He's insanely happy, like he must be on pills. No flippin fear in this man, just like bloody Phyllis. He has soft, soft hands when he shakes mine. Chats a bit, asks me what I do.

'I'm a dancer.'

'Ah, you can tell.' Careful not to look at my bod. Blushes a bit.

Dumi puts an arm around me, 'She's got that dancer's posture.' The preacher nods, off the hook. When Dumi drops his hand, it brushes my bum. Sends a pitch fork into my electrics. I think it was an accident. Eeesh. Desire.

My upside down life's got beautiful balance. I dunno how to explain. There's pain but it's not like a monster, you know? It's not hogging my whole damn life. And I'll ride it in my own good time. With no Syns.

And I *am* a professional dancer, Ma. We dance gigs for bucks. I get five hundred a night, no jokes, and we dance for less than one hour.

Like, we do a birthday party in a white marquee tent, like at the races. But this time we are flippin celebs. After we've danced, we climb into Phyllis's car in our tinkling, shimmering outfits. It's the women who see us off. They wave, wish us luck, like family at a flippin wedding.

We do a big office party in Long Street. You should see how quiet the men go afterwards. You should see how they shrink in their suits. The belly gives them respect, I swear. They get scared of the chicks. Not horny, like you'd think. They get scared of their spirit. They get scared of their hips. It's so funny, Ma, how the men gang together and drink.

You'd love to hear all the stories about our gigs. I know you would, Ma. Maybe I can tell you sometime.

Christmas time the South Easter comes back. Bastard bashes our thoughts together, whispers its violent whispers. But it's got no chance. What I do now, is I go to my own peaceful place. I mean, inside me. I tell the South Easter, try your best. You're not gonna blow me crazy. I've seen three miracles. Three in a row to keep one child alive.

Okay, they felt like flippin disasters.

First the condom popped. Then Battery Man. Then Merrick. They felt like hell. But they made me have Luke. Made me give up sex work. Made me give up pain. Made me dance, see?

On Christmas day I wake up buzzing like I'm plugged into heaven. The matric dance girl, Margaret, on my mind. I scratch through the trunk, find my abortion file. There's her number scribbled there.

'This is Tess, the chick from the hospital.'

Her silence says, go away. Get off the phone.

'How're you?' I ask.

'No, fine,' but soft. Maybe someone's listening.

'I just wanted to say don't worry. The baby doesn't mind. I gave mine away.'

'What?'

'The daddy didn't want it and I didn't want it either. But the mom and dad, they wanted it so badly. So I gave him to them.'

'But mine's ...'

'You gave him back to God.'

'I've been so sad.'

'Why? He's happy. Both ways.'

'He?'

Shit. She didn't even know.

'It was a little boy, like mine.'

Silence.

'But he's still alive with God.'

'Do you think so?'

'I'm a hundred percent sure.'

Christmas afternoon, Dumi and me go swim in the sea. We body surf like we used to when we were kids, race Josie. We only get out when the siren goes. They've spotted a shark from the top. I fly out the sea, shit scared. Then kill myself at Dumi and Josie, running on water to get to shore. Sharonne's there in a lime green bikini, putting sunblock on her white boy's back.

Dumi sits beautiful, dripping. 'How many cows would fit in your mother's back yard?'

Oh my God. He's doing it again. He's saying, Shela uzon-quonywa? Will you be my Zulu wife?

But I do it again, I stuff it all up with ugly words. 'Why? Do you wanna swap some meat for some meat?'

Dumi doesn't laugh. I try fix it, keep joking, 'You know what? I'm gonna take a cow to *your* mom. I'm gonna buy *you* with a cow. See how that feels.'

That gets him laughing. Josie thinks we're crazy, runs down to play in the wet sand. We slide off the subject, talk about how maybe Dumi can get off the aeroplane with me at Durban. We can both go see Gladys, Ma. Even if you don't wanna see me.

We're getting ready to fly. Ready to dance in front of thousands of people. They'll have a monster screen, project us onto it. I'm wearing white this time, white and silver. I tell Noel if he stays away from the trains, starting from now, I'll sew all his little presents onto my bra. I'll feel like a queen, I tell him, in Cairo. Noel's English is getting bloody good. He says, 'You and my sister are the same.'

Sheez, that gives me a helluva fright.

But you know, he's a bit right.

I tell him to tell his sister in French that when I get my Cairo money, I'm gonna get her a machine that sucks silver from the sand.

And I'm going to, I swear.

I'm gonna send this tomorrow Ma. I'm sending it registered so you'll have to sign.

I'll phone you from Cairo to see if I should come see you on the way home.

I hope you say yes.

Don't worry, I promise not to tip Graham's wheelchair over. Push it off that steep bank outside Angie's Pancakes. That solid red cliff. No bushes to catch him.

Seriously, Ma. I'd like to see you and Ange.

I miss you.



GLOSSARY

Guide to foreign languages and slang as they appear in the text.
Unless indicated otherwise, the translations below are Afrikaans
to English.

B

Bakkie: truck

Bergie: homeless person

Bleddy: bloody

Bleddy onnosele munt. Ek sal daai houtie donner: Bloody rude African. I will beat that African ('munt' and 'houtie' are racial slurs)

Boet: brother

Bok naai: sex with a woman (derogatory)

Bompies: frozen suckers

Bossies: Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome

Braai: barbecue

Broeks: pants

C

Cha: no (Zulu)

D

Daai: those

Danke: thank you (German)

Dankie vi'die kaartjies, Meneer: Thank you for the tickets, Mister

Dikbek: sulky (direct translation: thick mouth)

Dinges: thingy

Dom: dumb

Donnering: beating up

Dof: dim-witted

Drol: faeces

E

Ek wil'ie daai floppy hier hê nie: I don't want that African here ('floppy' is a racial slur)

Eina: ouch

F

Flak: trouble

Flossie: loose woman (derogatory)

Fynbos: vegetation indigenous to the Cape

G

God-weet-nie-wat-nie: God knows what
Goeters: things
Gooi: throw

H

Hakking: hacking
Harregat: aggressive
Hayi wene, isifebe: Hey you, bitch (Xhosa)
Hemel: heaven
Hoer: whore
Houding: strength; backbone
Hubbly bubbly: marijuana pipe, smoked through water

I

Impis: Zulu warriors (Zulu)

J

Ja: yes
Jol: party
Joller: partygoer
Jou ma se poes: your mother's vagina (derogatory)
Junne: neutral exclamation

K

Kaalgat: naked (direct translation: bare bum)
Kaffir: African (racial slur)
Kak: faeces
Kak n' betaal: pay up
Klap: smack
Knuip: clench
Koeksusters: syrupy doughnuts

Koppie: mountain outcrop
Kopstamped: head-butted
Kwaai: nice

L

Laaitjie: child
Lappies: cloths
Lekker: nice
Lobolo: payment by groom to bride's family (Zulu)
Lossit: leave it
Luister: listen
Lus: want

M

Maar: but
Maats: friends
Mal: mad
Mal hond: mad dog
Marcha: money
Meid: maid
Mielie: maize
Moer: beat up
Moerse: huge
Moffie: feminine man; homosexual
Muti: medicine
My kind: my child

N

Naai: have sex (derogatory)
Naartjie: fruit similar to an orange
Nee: no
Nooit: never

O

Onbeskof: rude

Ou: man

Ou meid: old maid

Ou rol: slut (direct translation: old roll)

P

Pap broek: cowardly (direct translation: limp pants)

Pasop: watch out

Poes: vagina (derogatory)

Pomp: have sex (derogatory)

Punda: meat (Zulu)

Putu: maize cereal

R

Ruks: rips

S

Saak: worry

Sies/Sis: expression of disgust

Sisi: sister (Zulu/Xhosa)

Shela umquonwa: Be my Zulu wife (Zulu)

Skaam: shy; shame

Skell: reprimand; shout at

Skollie: baddie; gangster

Skraal: thin

Sluip: slink; drag

Slap: soft

Slat: hit

Smaak: like

Snoek: species of fish

Snot en trane: snot and tears

Sommer: just

Soos: such as

Staal: steel

Stoep: veranda; balcony

Stompies: cigarette butts

Stukkie: girlfriend (direct translation: piece)

Suka: go (Zulu)

'Swaar: it's true

T

Tannie: auntie

Tjoep stil: dead quiet

Toe maar: don't worry

Tok-tokkie: species of beetle

Tronk stories: jail stories

V

Veld: field

Vloek: swear

Voetsek: go away (derogatory)

Vok: fuck

Vokken: fucking

Vreting: devouring

Vrekke: died

Vris ou: strong man; good fighter

Vrot: rotten

Vuil: dirty

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Wheatus, 'Hump 'Em And Dump 'Em'

*I'm gonna tell you all about it, Mom.
I'm gonna tell it like I'm on the end of
your bed, talking to you.*

*I'm not gonna cover up, cause there's
no need. You'll see how it's all a flippin
miracle. The whole weird year.*

*It's only one year in my life, Ma, but
it's all the stuff you slept through
when I was a kid. All the stuff you
fished through when you got up.*

I'm warning you, Ma, this is the truth.

*"Whiplash digs its nails into you from the
word go ... raw, tender and laugh-out-loud
funny – a kickarse gem of a book. Told with
startling poetry in the grittiest of emotional
landscapes, Whiplash puts Farren on the
map as a wordsmith of astonishing talent."*

– Joanne Fedler

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